DVD Select: 'Good Shepherd' not your typical spy movie

by Robert J. Hawkins

If ever there was a good soldier during the Cold War it was CIA counterintelligence specialist Edward Wilson (Matt Damon) in the epic drama "The Good Shepherd" (Universal 3 1/2 stars).

If you measure what a man gives up for his comrades and country, there would be few to match Wilson. It seems that, as the movie goes on, you shudder and wonder what more this guy could sacrifice. Each time he gives something, one more vestige of his dwindling humanity is wrenched from his core.

To live in a world in which you can trust no one, where nothing is as it seems and nobody is who they claim to be - that is Wilson's life.

'THE GOOD SHEPHERD' - Angelina Jolie and Matt Damon star in the spy thriller 'The Good Shepherd.' CNS Photo courtesy of Andrew Schwartz.

"The Good Shepherd," written by Eric Roth ("Munich") and directed by Robert De Niro, is the story of the CIA from its fledgling basement-operation World War II days as the OSS, right up to the opening of the sprawling spook edifice in Langley, Va.

It is told in flashbacks, starting from the infamously failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. Somebody leaked the CIA-backed operation to Fidel Castro and Wilson must take giant steps backward in his mind to retrace his steps and catch the mole.

The son of a high-ranking military officer who committed suicide, Edward Wilson holds his emotions close to his skin. A good trait for one in the business. He's a tough read.

Just the same, at Yale he breaks into the exclusive ranks of the Skull and Bones Society, the ultra-secretive boys' club for the privileged and elite - and apparently a fertile recruiting ground for spooks-in-training.

As an early recruit, Wilson grows up right along side the agency.

For it is at Yale where the old man, Gen. Bill Sullivan (De Niro), recruits him for work in England during the war. But first Wilson makes his stripes by turning in his college mentor Dr. Fredericks (Michael Gambon) as an alleged German sympathizer.

Wilson tolerates no betrayal of his country.

Before leaving for England, Wilson marries, not the girl of his dreams but the girl he happened to knock up, the blue-blooded Margaret Russell (Angelina Jolie). Theirs is a marriage that never had a chance. Wilson spends the next five years overseas. Never a warm or emotive person to begin with, his return to family and country is as chilly as the air.

Like his professional life, Wilson's family life is darkened by the myriad secrets he must bear, a situation that shapes the tragic destiny of his only son.

It is hard to not feel some compassion for Edward Wilson. He didn't choose the life of a spook, not really. It was impressed upon him by older men in need of young men the sacrifice their lives for country. The way it always is.

Wilson's deep reserve is both a crutch and a huge asset in counterintelligence where nothing is as it seems and nobody is who they say they are. With his inscrutable visage, more than one spy assumes that Wilson knows more than he is letting on. A huge advantage to Wilson.

But in the end it is Wilson alone but for his agency and the diffident comfort of his long-time aide Ray Brocco (John Turturro).

He's saved the country a few times - perhaps. It is never really clear - but he's lost everything else.

Edward Wilson is one of Hollywood's most tragic characters.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Volver" (Universal, 4 stars) Director Pedro Almodovar seems as though his whole career has been building toward this lovely story of several generations of women. Raimunda (Penelope Cruz) and her sister Sole (Lola Duenas) lost their parents in a tragic fire years ago. And yet there are tales of her mother Irene (Carmen Maura) - or perhaps her ghost - being seen by villagers. When an old aunt dies, the two women return to the village with Raimunda's teen daughter Paula (Yohana Cobo). It is the slightly scatterbrained Sole who first encounters their mother. Then there is the matter of the corpse that Raimunda has stashed in the freezer of her newly opened restaurant. Where there are messy ends to be tidied up, it takes a small group of strong and resilient women to do the job. Portraying that has always been Almodovar's strength, and never better than in "Volver."

"Charlotte's Web" (Paramount, 2 1/2 stars) A new adaptation of E.B. White's classic tale which takes full advantage of computer graphic illustration to bring together the marvelous spider Charlotte (voiced by Julia Roberts) and her barnyard pals with real animals and human beings. Other voices heard include Robert Redford, Steve Buscemi, Oprah Winfrey, Kathy Bates, Andre Benjamin, John Cleese, Thomas Hayden Church, Reba McEntire, Cedric the Entertainer and Dominic Scott Kay (as Wilbur). Dakota Fanning plays Fern.

OTHER FILMS DEBUTING THIS WEEK

The family drama "Aurora Borealis" with Donald Sutherland and Juliette Lewis; the sword-and sorcery fantasy "Attack of the Gryphon"; uplifting working-class tale from the Australian outback "Opal Dream"; sub-par slasher with sorority chicks in peril "Black Christmas"; Ed Harris is the composer in this imagined account of his final years "Copying Beethoven"; cutthroat maneuvering for control of a diner follows the

"accidental" death of the owner in "Hard Scrambled."

DOCUMENTARIES

"Rank" (Genius Products, 3 stars) This documentary follows three contenders for the Pro Bull Riding World Championship in Las Vegas. One is a third-generation contender, another a born-again Christian and the third is a two-time champ in the twilight of his career. What these guys won't do for that gold belt buckle.

KILLER STORY

"Death of a President" (Lionsgate, 3 1/2 stars) This fictional documentary is a look back at the October 2007 assassination of President George Bush and the events that followed.

You read that right. The assassination of George Bush. This coming October.

To say that British filmmaker Gabriel Range inspired a thunderstorm of indignation before his film opened is putting it mildly. The concept is more than a little provocative. "Death of a President" didn't play well in U.S.

theaters either.

The few who did see the film came away realizing that the indignation was created by people who hadn't seen the film, most regrettably among them Hillary Clinton.

The political thriller "Death of a President" is provocative, but in a most constructive way. It uses this horrific possibility as a jumping off point to probe American attitudes toward liberty, privacy, immigrants, due process, Constitutional rights, fear, and the like. For example, in the aftermath of the assassination, President Dick Cheney pushes through Patriot Act 3, much as Bush and Cheney bullied through the original Patriot Act. To say that this new assault on the Constitution gives unprecedented powers to government over its citizens is putting it mildly.

What Gabriel is looking at here is the way this country responds when attacked from within. His film is really a look back at 9/11 and the Bush administration's response to that, which was to run through the Constitution like a wounded bull in search of revenge, rather than justice.

When John F. Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King were all assassinated there was no loud cry to discard liberties, to lay waste to Constitutional rights and due process. Congress didn't rush through new laws that set back American principles by two centuries.

Sometimes it takes a fictionalized assassination to get your attention and ground your sense.

The film does not wallow in the assassination; it is not celebrated. In fact, Bush comes off (from craftily integrated news footage) as a far more sympathetic character than his miniscule approval rating would have him in real life today.

Gabriel's "post-assassination documentary" is most even-handed, more "fair and balanced" than anything you would see on Fox News today.

But why pick on a living president? In a phone call from England, Gabriel said "I was trying to get people to set aside that feeling that this hasn't happened." A fictional president would make it too easy to "compartmentalize the film as fiction and too easily dismiss what it has to say."

Gabriel emphasizes that he isn't predicting events.

And, you have to admit, he does get your attention.

IT CAME FROM TV

"The Naked Brothers Band: The Movie" (Paramount/Nickelodeon) Something for your tweener kids to go ga-ga over. Nat and Alex Wolff are real-like kid-musicians who are groomed to be TV heartthrobs.

Serial killers: Second season of "Twin Peaks"; season three, part one of HBO's "Entourage"; and season two of the uncensored "Mind of Mencia."

The Disney Channel rides the "High School Musical" wave with another splashy kid feature "Jump In!" Both star teen heartthrob Corbin Bleu.

FROM THE VAULTS

"All That Jazz" (Fox, 1979) Roy Scheider is a feverish and fiendish portrayal of the maniacal director/choreographer Bob Fosse in his final days. Also stars Jessica Lang, Ann Reinking and Ben Vereen. Memorable dance numbers and music.

More from the vaults: "Bedazzled" (1967); "Royal Flash" (1975); "S-P-Y-S" (1974);

PLAY BALL!

Barry Levinson adds 15 minutes to the Robert Redford-Glenn Close baseball romance "The Natural: Director's Cut" (1984). Here's a double-header on one disc: Yankee legends Mickey Mantle, Roger Maris and Whitey Ford have roles as themselves in the comedy "Safe at Home!" (1962); and William Bendix stars in "Kill the Umpire" (1951).

DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the $1 bin

Â© Copley News Service

DVD Select: 'Good Shepherd' not your typical spy movie by Robert J. Hawkins