

The Matador

The Matador, written and directed by Richard Shepard, brings us a new kind of Pierce Brosnan. Although he has done a variety of film roles (his role in *Evelyn*, for example, as a sympathetic housepainter/father), he will be indelibly remembered for his suave, crime-fighting persona as either TV's Remington Steele or as the most recent James Bond. Here he is cast way against that type as a globetrotting hit man who is losing his grip. He still looks great when he's wearing the right gear, but we see him more often as a smart-ass, drunken debauchee who wears flowered shirts and sports a three-day growth.

The Matador (the "killer" in Spanish) opens with Brosnan, as killer-for-hire Julian Noble, messing up on one job, only to be sent to Mexico City to redeem himself with a new hit. At a hotel bar, he meets cute with Danny Wright (Greg Kinnear), a Denver businessman who is in town with a colleague (Adam Scott) to nail down a crucial deal, one that could decide his company's future. Though Julian is unabashedly crude, the two, over margaritas, "bond" (to coin a phrase) in a fashion, enough to go the next day to the bullfight, where Julian--while explaining about that other "matador" in the ring--admits he is a hitman. Sensing Danny's desperation for his deal, Julian wonders if he could be of some service.

Later on, after Danny's Mexican sojourn turns out successfully, Julian has another breakdown on a job, and he himself becomes the object of a hit by his disgruntled handlers. Where better to hide out than with his "only" friend, Danny Wright? So he crashes impetuously with Danny and his wife Bean (Hope Davis). Julian's threatening yet pathetic presence leads Danny to reluctantly help him out with one last big hit.

This black and nery comedy has its moments, often when Brosnan delivers one of director Shepard's tart one-liners (sample: "I look like a Bangkok hooker on a Sunday morning, after the navy's left town.") The sinuous plot line is clever, if hopelessly implausible. The ambience of Mexico City (Shepard filed his last film there in 2001), a racetrack in San Diego, and some intriguing European locations are nicely captured.

Greg Kinnear is neatly cast as the fresh-faced, gullible traveling Danny who succumbs to Noble's rude charms and lethal skills. You can almost believe that he might be carried along with this exotic creature that is Julian. And Brosnan's Julian is the principal reason to see this picture. Throughout the movie, he exhibits--if this is not an oxymoron--what could be called a smooth, smarmy nature, giving off an air of super-competence when he is, in fact, vulnerable and coarse in the same breath, telling dirty jokes to hide his pain. It's a tough role to bring off, and I'm not sure he, or Shepard's script, do quite pull it off, but kudos to Pierce Brosnan for trying it and for trying to branch out into other material now that 007 is off his plate.

("The Matador" is rated "R" for tough language and seamy situations.)

(January 2006)