

The Quiet American

Graham Greene, at his best, was a novelist who was a master of describing the personal in the political, creating full-blooded--often doomed--characters within a context of real political conflict. One of the best in this genre was "The Quiet American," published in 1955, which traced the first tentative steps of American involvement in the South East Asian war. Now, almost 50 years later, the novel comes to the screen again (an earlier version was made in 1958) and offers a probing look at the Vietnam misadventure.

The Quiet American of the title is Alden Pyle (Brendan Fraser), an apparently innocent aid worker who wants to do right by Vietnam, mired in its ongoing war with the French in 1952. His good works are viewed skeptically by a tired old London Times correspondent, Thomas Fowler (Michael Caine), who, with his wife tucked back home, is sardonically content with his sinecure in Saigon and his doll-like Vietnamese girlfriend Phoung (Do Thin Hei Yen). The threatening Vietcong rebels are heating up the war in the North, which energizes Pyle to greater up-country assistance efforts while it provides the excuse for Fowler to fend off his editors' request to return to England and actually begin to do some reporting. In a troubled rural area, the two men happen upon a massacre, after which Pyle saves Fowler's life. But the relationship between the two men becomes complicated when Pyle unabashedly declares his love for Phoung, and Fowler begins to question the true motivation of the American. As Saigon comes directly under fire from the rebels, Pyle reveals his true self and betrayal raises its head.

The Quiet American was directed by Phillip Noyce, an Aussie whose name has been associated lately with big Hollywood pictures like *Clear and Present Danger* and *The Bone Collector*. More recently, he has returned to his South Asian roots, first with the splendid *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, made in Australia and based on a heartening true story, and now *The Quiet American*, shot--very effectively--on location in Vietnam. The latter film was originally scheduled to be released earlier last year, but the film's distributors held it back because they were worried audiences would be turned off by its portrayal of questionable American foreign policy moves in a post 9/11 atmosphere.

The money men needn't have worried, because the real drama here--typical for Greene--resides in the moral dilemma of the protagonists, not in the political points to be made. The script, written by Robert Schneckman and Christopher Hampton, does use, as the novelist did, the two men as symbols of their cultures in part: Pyle, a naive idealist anxious to impose his values regardless of the human cost, and Fowler, the wasted cynic mired in drink and sloth. New Empire vs. Old Empire, with the author slyly rooting for the cynic.

The two perfectly cast leads embody that moral calculus that Greene and director Noyce want to convey. Fraser's Pyle is ever earnest, and he always (rightly) seems out of place within Saigon's steaminess. His character is seconded by his credulous features and the guilelessness of his raw body language. Pyle's seeming blankness sets you up smartly for a stunning turnaround in his nature which is revealed at the film's end.

Michael Caine has already told interviewers that his role as Fowler is as good as any he has been offered in decades. It is, indeed, tailor-made for him, and he slips into

this wasted Brit outfit like a second skin. He personifies that familiar figure in the Graham Greene universe, a highly flawed, even weak man whose moral choice-- however shaky--ultimately focuses on an individual human being rather than aiming at some grander political good. Caine, looking appropriately flabby and lined, moves from dissipation to burgeoning ethical awareness to righteous outrage when he realizes how Pyle has misled him. He handles all of these tones, and a number of others, with uncommon ease and skill. *The Quiet American*, thus, ends with The Aroused Englishman.

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