

The Statement

The new film *The Statement* comes laden with credentials and putative interest. It recounts the true-life story of a Nazi collaborator, the Frenchman Pierre Bossard, hunted down during 1992 by French authorities. It is adapted from a novel based on the search by the fine Irish-Canadian novelist Brian Moore, itself adapted into a screenplay by a superior screenwriter (Ronald Harwood). It boasts a starry English cast and one of cinema's most lauded directors (Norman Jewison), shooting in and around Provence and other attractive sites. Perhaps it comes weighed down with too many expectations, because--though the film is sporadically entertaining--it turns out to be finally more dutiful than dazzling.

The Statement begins with its protagonist Bossard (Michael Caine) under surveillance from a mysterious agent who he summarily kills. Then Bossard, accused of fingering a number of Jews for extermination by the Nazis, goes on the run, hiding with the help of sympathetic (or jaded) Catholic clergy and a shadowy mentor. Meanwhile, a French investigating judge A. Livi (Tilda Swinton) is assigned by the Justice Ministry to track him down with the help of the intrepid policeman Colonel Roux (Jeremy Northam), even though higher-ups like the Minister (Alan Bates) warn them about getting too close to some ominous forces protecting both Bossard and elements of France's Vichy past. The film plays itself out as a cat-and-mouse game, the anxious Bossard fleeing from rural church to seaside town, where he's shielded by his estranged wife (Charlotte Rampling) and back, while Livi and Roux stalk him, aware that they are not the only ones after Bossard.

Such a chase drama with historic overtones and practiced actors should crackle and hiss with drama and tension (think of one of the classics of the type, *The Day of the Jackal*). Unfortunately for Jewison (*In the Heat of the Night*, *Moonstruck*, *The Hurricane*) and his team, the parts of this suspense machine never fully mesh.

A major part of the problem may be a thoroughly unsympathetic lead: Caine, who has proven himself such a versatile character actor, plays a personage of little complexity, but one who evinces a pathetic mix of harried loser and coarse Catholic fanatic. The script simply doesn't give him enough to do, except look over his shoulder. Swinton and Northam exude earnestness and intelligence, but they lack chemistry together. Then, too, the tale is thorny, with bewildering twists and turns that lack clean exposition and make the filmgoer wonder who really is trying to bump off whom..

At bottom, one simply does not care enough whether Pierre Bossard gets his just desserts or whether the French higher-ups are revealed.

(February 2004)