

The Clearing

Call it a suspense film with a difference. This new hostage/kidnapping drama comes served with impressive acting ingredients: an American screen icon (Robert Redford), one of England's most redoubtable acting talents (Helen Mirren), and one of the movie's best chameleons (Willem Dafoe). Guiding these veterans is a neophyte director, Dutchman Pieter Jan Brugge, who has only produced before (*The Insider*, for one). What he has achieved is a true rarity: a thriller with restraint and a suspenser with no real twist. Whether film audiences used to cruder fare will cotton to Brugge's method remains to be seen.

Redford is a weathered entrepreneur/millionaire, Wayne Hayes, living in a fashionable Pittsburgh suburb with his impeccable wife Eileen (Mirren). On his routine ride to work, he is accosted by Arnold Mack (Dafoe), a dour, disgruntled ex-employee of one of Hayes' businesses. Arnold takes him, bound and shoeless, into the woods, insisting to the magnate that he is performing the kidnapping for others. Back at the manse, the troubled Eileen, hearing nothing from her husband, calls in the authorities (and her two grown children) and learns to live for the next several days with an FBI team led by businesslike agent Fuller (Matt Craven).

The film ping pongs between Wayne and Arnold in the woods and Eileen at home, with occasional flashbacks from the characters' memory banks. The sequences in the woods serve to outline the natures of the antagonists: the cunning Hayes trying to manipulate--as he has manipulated so many others--the Sad Sack Arnold, who, even with a gun in his hand, never strays from being soft-spoken and courteous. The sequences at home balance the occasional FBI tactical move with Eileen's gradual coming to grips with the secrets of her marriage. Surprisingly, *The Clearing*, which seems to be building to a revelatory turn-around (as the audience has been conditioned to expect) reveals just what you have come to suspect, once you realize the film has been told in two different time sequences.

Does that mean the movie lacks the payoff, "da punch?" It certainly does if compared to louder, more juiced hostage movies like Mel Gibson's *Ransom* of 1996. Here the tones, from the dappled greenery of the woods to Eileen's wardrobe, are understated, muted. Likewise the music, often just the whisper of a piano solo (if you sense any music track at all). The acting throughout, too, evidences restraint instead of emoting--not to be expected in such a climate of tension. Violence is constantly implied, but almost always held in check, except for one burst of fighting, which is messy and real and over quickly. It turns out to be as much as a revealer of character as anything else in the picture.

Let's just say you won't be stuffing sweaty handfuls of popcorn into your mouth with *The Clearing*. It's more a film to watch with a dark chocolate bar--and be sure to wipe your fingers.

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