

Duplicity

Spring can be the time for light-heartedness, a breeze of levity and charm after somber winter days. So it can be with Hollywood, which typically opens earnest, sometimes even forbidding, end-of-year movie dramas—aiming at awards consideration—before the new year gives it a chance to be blithe again. One satisfying example of spring's light-heartedness is the new comedy *Duplicity*, starring Julia Roberts and Clive Owen as two spies testing love and trust in the corporate world.

Claire Stenwick (Roberts) is an ex-CIA agent who has left The Company to make some serious bucks as an industrial spy, serving as a counterintelligence officer for Burkett and Randle, a multinational cosmetics firm, while acting as a mole on behalf of another company, Equikron. Ray Koval (Owen) is an ex-MI-6 operative who has also joined the industrial espionage racket as an agent for the latter.

The two firms are major New York-based enterprises who are fiercely competitive, as are their respective bosses, Howard Tully (Tom Wilkinson) and Dick Garsik (Paul Giamatti), ravenous corporate beasts who are literally (as shown in a great opening slow-motion, in-the-rain wrestling sequence) at each others throats. When Tully's outfit Burkett signals—through an insider note surreptitiously acquired—a new pharmaceutical breakthrough, Garsik's agents, headed by Ray, go all out to find it. He ends up as the agent “running” the mole, Claire, as both attempt to learn the secret formula, undercut Burkett and Randle, and sell the item themselves for a fortune.

The above is a mere outline of the somewhat conventional plot, but corkscrewed around it is a series of ever-more revealing flashbacks, beginning in 2003, when Ray and Claire first meet, and each one covers a tighter and tighter time frame. Through the flashbacks, we learn that the two spies have an ample history together, have long been lovers, and have mutually agreed to change their lives by moving from the clandestine world into the business world. At the end, the flashbacks catch up to the present as a last-ditch effort is made to steal the secret formula.

The movie is swift and well paced, and the dialogue, written by director Tony Gilroy, is both smart and tart. The script may not always be in the league of say, those of the *Thin Man* series with William Powell and Myrna Loy, or the Tracy-Hepburn comedies, but for the too-often dumbed-down 21st century, it's positively witty. For such dialogue to work, the leads must exude real chemistry. Here they do, and every bit of too arch conversation between Roberts and Owen is more than overcompensated for by the best exchanges, accompanied by fetching body language and sexy eye contact.

While this is a full-blown comedy, Gilroy's script (his last wrote the brilliant *Michael Clayton* in 2007, likewise dealing with corporate shenanigans) also tinkers with the more serious sub theme of spy craft, that of trust and betrayal, and whether thoroughgoing spies can ever stop “playing” each other and simply be. The on-going “game” of their trade mingled with their love affair keeps them both—and the audience—on its toes.

As indicated, Roberts and Owen mesh nicely. Roberts has, of course, perfected this kind of classy comedy over 20 years as a star, and here, now 41, she is as fetching as ever. As for Clive Owen, it's, in fact, a relief to find this British actor perfectly charming and disarming in a frothy role for once after his parade of brooding, knit-

browed appearances in so many other stark dramas (*Closer, Inside Man, Children of Men, The International*, et al.). Turns out he can use that tortured, nonplussed face for fine comic effect and then sport a grin that's a winner. It's fun, too, to watch them bounce around in exquisite clothes in locations like Rome, London, and Dubai, as well as slick New York.

The two principal featured players, Wilkinson and Giamatti, should also be mentioned. Wilkinson is more the smooth, smarmy type, caged in an aerie office as cold as polished aluminum. His one monologue—giving a company speech—drips with furtiveness and condescension. Giamatti is a sputtering, much coarser type, more than willing to get down and dirty. His singular speech, announcing the product he has purloined, is a little masterpiece of false modesty and staged bonhomie. Both actors are over the top and all the better for it. And then there is their wrestling scene--and it's the only "violence" in the movie!

(*"Duplicity is rated "PG-13;" running time 125 mins.*)

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