

Syriana

A major year-end picture which has been seen by your friendly reviewer and which is worth commenting upon is the new international thriller *Syriana*. It was written and directed by Stephen Gaghan, Oscar-winning screenwriter for *Traffic* (2000), one of the best films--in my estimation--of the last ten years. *Syriana* shares a number of similarities with *Traffic*: it is a fast-paced, complex contemporary thriller told in mosaic form with multiple, interlaced story lines peopled with very diverse personages and locales. The big difference: whereas *Traffic* turned on the inter-American drug trade, *Syriana*'s driver is the international oil market and its sundry players.

The movie's tag line is "Everything is Connected" and, to make that case, the various story lines follow Bob Barnes (George Clooney), a world-weary CIA Mid-east operative who gets one last chance to do a job in his beloved Beirut; Bryan Woodman (Matt Damon) an oil broker based in Geneva who suffers family tragedy but who also comes to advise the heir of an oil emirate (Alexander Siddig); a D.C. corporate lawyer, Bennett Holiday (Jeffrey Wright), who delicately balances both the business and government sides concerned with a major oil merger; and young Pakistani emigre (Mazhar Munir) who, after losing his job in the oil fields, turns to terrorism. There are, in fact, several other subplots which feature major players (and actors) such as a tough oil man Jimmy Pope (Chris Cooper), Whiting (Christopher Plummer), a top-drawer Washington sleazoid, and Danny Dalton (Tim Blake Nelson), a single-minded conservative lobbyist who rhapsodizes about corruption. The principal plot line concerns whether the energy-hungry Chinese or the rapacious U.S. oil industry gets control of the resources of an oil-rich Arab state.

The resulting multifold narrative, wherein the many strands to intertwine, thus requires that the viewer pay close attention to get the drift. Even paying close attention, however, the steady intercutting between sequences and characters can make the head spin. And perhaps getting the strands all in line isn't really the point. Perhaps Gaghan's aim is to deliver a movie of constant momentum, of urgency and tension which mirrors, and thus comments on, what is really going on in the worldwide energy game.

Syriana delivers on the urgency. The constant U-turns and intercuts gives the film a pulse-pounding, headlong quality (aided by a taut, nervous score by Alexandre Desplat). In that, and with its political subtext, it may remind some moviegoers of the early films of Costa-Gavras, and, indeed, of *Traffic*. The acting is undertoned and earnest, appropriate in a film of action and argument. The locations are exotic and effective (Morocco and Dubai being two); the whole project is one intended for adults.

Some of the performances merit mention. Clooney, with a salt-and-pepper beard and a beer belly, extends his acting range further (as he does in the recent *Good Night, and Good Luck*) from the easy-going romantic leads in which he has specialized. Matt Damon nicely balances the decent family man with the zealous derivatives trader. Newcomer Mazhar Munir does a decent job of showing how an isolated, disaffected youth might succumb to the otherworldly appeal of Islamic fundamentalism.

Yet, with all its ambitions, *Syriana* does not match either the power or the clarity of Gaghan's earlier effort *Traffic* (and this reviewer cannot, with their parallels, help comparing the two films). First, the movie tries to do too much. All the myriad story lines

are probably too many to follow clearly in what is already a convoluted plot full of unspoken, sinister overtones. I'm reminded of another ambitious, multi-faceted film of this year, *Crash*, which, though fascinating in many aspects, simply tried to do too much within the scope of its running time. Concentrating fully on three or four overriding narratives (as *Traffic* did) would have made a more coherent chronicle. Second--and here I don't mean to give anything away--the film's argument is unremittingly bleak and most of its personages consistently cynical. For all of its huff and puff, *Syriana* trails out its sundry story lines to a hopeless sourness.

To note, also: viewers should be aware that *Syriana* has a hard "R" rating and includes a most repellent scene of torture--involving the Bob Barnes character--which could make many a stomach queasy.

Maybe I'm being too hard on *Syriana*; it may be a function of my high original expectations of Gaghan (this is the first film he has directed). Maybe the way to watch this film is not to try to follow its intricate ins and outs, but to just let it wash over you...like oil.

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