

First

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Call of the wild:

Fiennes plays a relict horticulture aficionado on a mission of passion.

DARK CONTINENT

Set in a steamy Africa of infidelity, murder, and revenge, Fernando Meirelles' *The Constant Gardener* is a twist-a-minute adaptation of the John le Carré thriller in which the roots of deception run shockingly deep. Karen Durbin reviews

Fernando Meirelles spins electrifying entertainment out of the darkest materials. Two years ago, the Brazilian filmmaker attracted Hollywood's attention and four Oscar nominations—including for best director and best cinematography—with *City of God*, a heart-thumping, fact-based tale of deadly teenage drug gangs running wild in an isolated housing project outside Rio de Janeiro. Leaping onto the international stage with a compulsively watchable adaptation of John le Carré's 2000 best-selling novel, *The Constant Gardener*, Meirelles (pronounced meh-RAY-ess) proves himself a world-class director, making his English-language debut with one of the best movies of the year.

Brilliantly shot among the raw beauty and poverty of Africa, *The Constant Gardener* is a love story, a character study, and a hair-raising political thriller about a different sort of drug gang, one that its critics call Big Pharma: multinational pharmaceutical companies that run pretty wild themselves in some of the poorest places on earth while their home governments, in the West, turn a blind eye. The action kicks off with horrific news, when Justin Quayle (Ralph Fiennes), a minor British diplomat stationed in Kenya, learns that his young wife, Tessa (Rachel Weisz), a lawyer and social activist, has been raped and murdered. Her driver is dead too, and the African doctor she was working with has disappeared. Then Justin is told it may have been a crime of passion, because Tessa is rumored to have been sexually involved with both men.

This gratuitously cruel suggestion is delivered with skin-crawling sanctimony by Justin's boss, Sandy Woodrow (Danny Huston, master of the place where suave meets slime). In the movie's merciless portrait of the British diplomatic corps (which Le Carré knows well), Justin is a lamb among wolves, a gentle soul and duti-

ful functionary who cares more about his potted plants than his career. But the fiery Tessa is the love of his life, and her death makes him a dangerous man, willing to risk everything because he has nothing to lose. *The Constant Gardener* has the structure and suspense of a classic mystery, with Tessa revealed to us in flashbacks through Justin's search for her killers (and through Weisz's earthy, mischievous performance, in which she appears cosmetics-free and, part of the time, hugely pregnant). But the movie's investigation of responsibility is more extensive and disturbing than any simple whodunit. As Justin tracks Tessa's work and discovers the enemies she made inside the government and out, a far-reaching network of hypocrisy, corruption, and greed unfolds, all the more frightening because it's cloaked in respectability. One of the movie's more paradoxical satisfactions is the sense it gives you of seeing the truth of how our world works—and it's not pretty.

A film in which the British High Commissioner (a coolly monstrous Bill Nighy) ranks lower on the moral scale than a gang of murdering thugs makes a discomfiting point about the globalization of society: Put enough distance between an action and its consequences and there's no limit to the evil that becomes possible. Yet *The Constant Gardener* isn't the work of a scold. Meirelles and cinematographer César Charlone, who also shot *City of God*, are too sensual for that. In the midst of the suffering and paranoia, they surprise us again and again with pleasure and visual wit, whether it's a scene of love-making shot in such tight close-up that it feels like an erotic jigsaw puzzle or the movie's portrait of Kenya, so eye-poppingly alive that it's never reduced to backdrop, nor its people to mere victims. Building to an unforgettable finale that's both tragic and triumphant, *The Constant Gardener* is passionate filmmaking, the kind that calls you to account as it breaks your heart. □

