



MOVIES

Carré Nation In the thrilling *Constant Gardener*, opposites attract and political skulduggery is everywhere.

BY KEN TUCKER

IN THE TRANSFIXING THRILLER *The Constant Gardener*—an adaptation of John Le Carré's novel by *City of God* director Fernando Meirelles—Ralph Fiennes gives one of the year's subtlest, yet most exciting, screen performances, modulating from callow British diplomat to impassioned lover of both Rachel Weisz and Third World justice. Le Carré's politics haven't been as artfully transferred to the movies since Richard Burton starred in Martin Ritt's *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold* (1965), a film so assiduously bleak, so British-German dour, it should have inspired a new genre: film *gris*.

Fiennes stars as London-based Justin Quayle, first secretary of the British chancery in Nairobi; his wife, as we learn in the opening moments of the movie, has been found raped and murdered in Kenya. Much of the movie consists of flashbacks to her short life: Rachel Weisz's Tessa was a crusader for the poor, a privileged young woman who used her small bit of power and enormous reserves of intelligence, guile, and sex appeal to get into foreign countries where militant whites might otherwise be rebuffed. Her aim was straightforward: to pressure international drug companies to lower prices and prevent them from using African citizens with AIDS and tuberculosis as guinea pigs.

In the process of this idealistic labor, she entrances—and radicalizes—our humble British functionary. Justin and Tessa meet when he gives a boilerplate speech about government policy. Spewing insolence, Tessa challenges his institutionalized complacency, and Justin is thoroughly shaken—and (like a far more dashing international figure) stirred. After a quick flirtation, sex, and marriage (all of which Meirelles and screenwriter Jeffrey Caine pull off with sensuous wit), Tessa leaves for Kenya to fight the good fight, one impoverished citizen and one unfeeling government officer at a time, while Justin tries to push policy through diplomatic means. You might suspect that Fiennes

took a bit of Justin's sly reticence from Alec Guinness's portrayal of another, greater Le Carré character, George Smiley, in the marvelous 1979 TV mini-series *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, but Fiennes lends Justin his own bright gaze and sharp rasp, convincing you that this character is capable of so much more than he seems.

In some ways, Fiennes and Weisz are a classic movie couple; you can apply Katharine Hepburn's standard dictum regarding Astaire and Rogers—"He gives her class; she gives him sex"—to this duo as well. But they also possess a modern, idiosyncratic pragmatism about love and the world. Director Meirelles

and his close collaborator, cinematographer César Charlone, have the patience to allow this central relationship to build in long scenes, allowing the mood to shift in real time. And the filmmakers carve out witty visual metaphors throughout: Often, Fiennes begins in the corner of the frame, so that we see what he's seeing, and then the camera shifts so that he is abruptly central to the action, thus dramatizing the ways in which this quiet observer is forced to assert himself by the circumstances that surround him.

Once Justin, desperate to solve Tessa's murder, begins crossing his superiors (including the ever-adroit Bill Nighy), Meirelles ratchets up the pace; frantic handheld-camera work alternates with more languid shots that permit us to observe the nuances of the profiteers' machinations.

In *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold*, Burton's "handler" tells him, "You can't be less wicked than your enemies simply because your government's policies are benevolent." That was Cold War realism. In *The Constant Gardener*, the message goes one step deeper: It is clear that the remorseless amorality of governments bad and good will prove a more implacable impediment to humanity than the "wickedness" of any one man or woman. It's a measure of how far we've moved that Le Carré's latter-day stories, and this movie, suggest that there are enemies on both sides—even among one's friends—and thus only individual acts of sacrifice or heroism mean much. Still, ultimately, one tragedy will compound another, and we're thankful to have Fiennes's steady, soulful gaze to keep utter despair—his, ours—at bay. ■

THE CONSTANT GARDENER
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