

Rolling Stone

The Constant Gardener ★★½

Ralph Fiennes, Rachel Weisz, Bill Nighy

Directed by Fernando Meirelles

A sizzling political thriller that ends summer on a high note

THIS LATE-AUGUST RELEASE COMES in the nick of time to prove a point: Movies that give a damn do have

a place in summer. Director Fernando Meirelles, justly Oscar-nominated for 2003's *City of God* (set in the slums of his native Brazil), again performs visual miracles that resonate with feeling. He and screenwriter Jeffrey Caine put a human face on John le Carré's novel of sex, lies and

dirty politics in modern Africa. Prepare for a thrilling ride.

Ralph Fiennes meets all the challenges of playing Justin Quayle, a British diplomat in Kenya who would rather tend his garden than deal with the difficult questions he's asked by Tessa Abbott (Rachel Weisz). She's a firebrand activist who thinks the Brit higher-ups, led by Sir Bernard Pellegrin (Bill Nighy), are in league with a pharmaceutical company to use suffering Africans as guinea pigs for drug experiments. Justin is a little scared by Tessa and a lot attracted.

That this eventual marriage of opposites works is mostly due to a tacit agreement that Justin will turn a blind eye to Tessa's relentless goading of Her Majesty's operatives. But when she dies in an alleged car accident, Justin's eyes are slowly opened. Rumors fly that Tessa had been getting it on with the African doctor (Hubert Koundé) who died with her. Justin's jealousy

is fueled by his Iago-ish colleague (Danny Huston). Flashbacks of the couple — in and out of bed — allow for several teasing points of view.

The movie kicks in hard as thriller when Justin takes up Tessa's cause. He travels to London, Berlin and Nairobi, risking his career and his life to uncover a political conspiracy that might also reveal the truth about his wife. It's a love story between a man and a ghost, and Fiennes and Weisz give every gesture and glance a haunting erotic urgency. The underrated Weisz is electrifying in her richest role to date. And Fiennes plays this reluctant hero like a gathering storm, his performance growing in power as passivity ceases to be an option. His embrace of Africa, which Meirelles and his gifted cinematographer César Charlone, present as a rebuke to global indifference, is his embrace of Tessa. In negotiating the slippery slope of political and personal commitment, Meirelles emerges with one of the year's best and most provocative movies. Long after it's over, you still feel its sting.

