

F I L M R E V I E W

The duplicity of 'Duplicity'

Julia Roberts and Clive Owen's battle of wits, intrigue and desire harkens to the glory days of Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant

BY A. O. SCOTT
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Duplicity: the title suggests something with two sides, but the film itself, the second (after *Michael Clayton*) written and directed by Tony Gilroy, has many more layers and facets. Its densely coiled plot and splintered chronology reveal a cascade of familiar genres and styles. It's a caper movie, a love story — with Clive Owen and Julia Roberts, no less — an extra-dry corporate satire. However you describe it, *Duplicity* is superior entertainment, the most elegantly pleasurable movie of its kind to come around in a very long time.

The kind of movie it seems most obviously to be — the jet-set spy thriller, decorated with eye-candy vistas of London, New York, Dubai and Rome (among other intrigue-ridden spots) — has suffered a bit of an identity crisis since the end of the cold war. Yes, the James Bond franchise soldiers on, but even at the height of Soviet-American brinkmanship, 007 always conducted his tongue-in-cheek operations on the margins of the grand geopolitical chess game, facing down cartoon supervillains rather than KGB alter egos. It was symmetry — two big nations, armed to the teeth, sending brilliant, cynical operatives out to do their shadowy dirty work — that defined the classic spy game in, for instance, the novels of John le Carré. But the current age of asymmetrical, decentralized conflicts has taken some of the fun and the moral complexity out of fictional espionage, on screen and off.

In his scripts for the three vertiginously involuted *Bourne* movies, Gilroy has tried to restore some of those qualities, building a fascinating puzzle on the meager foundation of Robert Ludlum's airport doorstops. *Duplicity*, in the absence of contending, more or less evenly matched superpowers, deploys two multinational corporations, Burkett & Randle and Equikrom, who conduct a steely, ruthless game of proxy battles, psy-ops, counterintelligence and

disinformation. Their executives talk the language of grand strategy and total war, and even though their battlefield is the global market for dandruff shampoo, premium diapers and moisturizing creams (or lotions — the distinction apparently matters), nobody regards the stakes as trivial.

The only moment of actual violence in this marvelously tense film, and the only scene of true slapstick in a very funny picture, comes during the opening titles, when the chief executives of the two companies come to blows on a rain-soaked tarmac in front of their corporate jets, seconded by squads of anxious senior vice presidents. I could have watched their flailing, sputtering fisticuffs, played in slow motion with the sound drained away, for at least two hours, imagining any number of real-life CEOs in place of Paul Giamatti and Tom Wilkinson, who play the two angry captains of industry. Even if the rest of *Duplicity* had fizzled, it would be worth seeing for that sequence alone.

Happily, the movie effervesces instead. The epic struggle between Burkett & Randle and Equikrom is, in a way, a global-capitalism red herring, the scaffolding for a different, more intimate sort of combat. If what thrills you is the swift-moving, unrelenting contest between equal and opposing forces, then the movies you seek out are surely the great romantic comedies of the studio era, verbal boxing matches that draw blood and end in kisses. And you have to go back that far — to the glory days of Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant, let's say — to find a duel of sharp wits, hidden agendas and simmering desires as satisfying as what transpires between Julia Roberts and Clive Owen.

The two of them failed to generate much of a spark in Mike Nichols's *Closer*, but that was surely because the atmosphere in that somber little chamber piece was too damp. Here, from the moment they meet, sipping frozen drinks at a Middle Eastern Fourth of July bar-

becue, a crackle of sexual tension ignites between them.

"Are you always like this?" she asks, responding to pickup lines that sound as if they were memorized from a feature in *Maxim*.

"No," he confesses. "I sometimes act like this, but this is completely different."

And so he charms her into bed — or rather, falls into the honey trap she has rigged just by standing around the garden in a flowery dress, looking bored. She — Claire is what she's called, though who knows if it's her real name — is CIA; he — we'll call him Ray — is MI6. Apparently they're not on the same side, but that's a minor political detail in which the movie has no further concern.

The point of Claire's initial double cross is to map out the intersection of her and Ray's professional and sexual interests. He is burned, humiliated, unmanned — and totally smitten. What follows between them is perhaps his revenge, perhaps her repentance and maybe her second act. He was so easy to fool the first time, after all.

Five years after that first, ambiguous roll in the hay, Claire and Ray, retired from government work, are embroiled in the Burkett-Equikrom war. A series of flashbacks establishes that they are working together, but the point of each of those scenes, which bring us closer to the present (via London, Miami and Cleveland), is to make us wonder which is playing the other. Or even, hard as it may be for Ray or Claire or anyone else to believe, whether their allegiance, rooted in lust, greed and maybe something more, is sincere and aboveboard after all.

Along the way, Owen, on whom a two-piece suit becomes as brazenly sexual a uniform as anything you can imagine, opens many bottles of Champagne and looks hungrily at Roberts, even though Claire is more of a natural predator than Ray. For this film, her first real starring role in quite a while,



Julia Roberts and Clive Owen star in *Duplicity*, directed by Tony Gilroy.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

Film Notes

DUPLICITY

DIRECTED BY: TONY GILROY

STARRING: JULIA ROBERTS (CLAIRE STENWICK), CLIVE OWEN (RAY KOVAL), TOM WILKINSON (HOWARD TULLY), PAUL GIAMATTI (RICHARD GARSIK), DENIS O'HARE (DUKE MONAHAN), KATHLEEN CHALFANT (PAM FRALES), TOM MCCARTHY (JEFF BAUER), CARRIE PRESTON (BARBARA BOFFERD) AND RICK WORTHY (DALE RAIMES)

RUNNING TIME: 125 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

Roberts has almost entirely left behind the coltish, America's-sweetheart mannerisms, except when she uses them strategically, to disarm or confuse. Curvier than she used to be and with a touch of weariness around her eyes and impatience in her voice, she is, at 41, unmistakably in her prime.

Gilroy's most ingenious structural gamble — the duplicity of *Duplicity* — is to make foreground and background almost perfectly reversible. It's a sharp, sexy comedy masquerading as a twisty tale of intrigue, and vice versa. And as soon as you grow impatient with the pre- or postcoital repartee of Roberts and Owen, a nimble army of supporting players comes forward to deliver Gilroy's mordantly funny dialogue with perfectly straight faces.

Giamatti and Wilkinson are a perfectly mismatched set, embodying different styles of corporate arrogance, while their underlings and enforcers (notably Denis O'Hare, Kathleen Chalfant, Tom McCarthy and Rick Worthy) display the varieties of sycophancy, treachery, vanity and incompetence found in every cubicle farm, ever so slightly heightened for comic and suspenseful effect. (Carrie