

Laina At the Movies, November 2011
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Tower Heist

Revenge stories have a long history\227actually a universal history. In Western civilization, the most revenge obsessed were 16th century Spain and Italy, with top prizes for continuity going to Sicily. We see obsession with revenge today mostly in tribal societies (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq\227or any place with both tribalism and Islam). Although cultures with law and order (Western Europe and the United States) do not take kindly to vengeance seekers, our popular arts still like this theme. The latest of this sort is Tower Heist, a revenge story that rouses fantasies in all the public that remembers jailbird Bernie Madoff, king of Ponzi Schemes and poster boy for naked greed.

In this story, a group of loyal workers for a billionaire, owner of a posh tower (like that of Donald Trump?) are bilked out of their retirement nest-eggs which they trustingly put in the hands of Arthur Shaw, the Bernie Madoff-like villain in the film, played by the charming Alan Alda. The tower\222s manager, Josh Kovacs (Ben Stiller) and an assortment of his fellow workers, when they learn that their retirement funds have vanished, decide to find out where Shaw has hidden some big money (that he pretends not to have) and steal it back.

Since none of them had ever taken anything, they need the help of a practiced thief, played brilliantly by Eddie Murphy, who really steals the show. His wicked glee was infectious.

The heist takes place on Thanksgiving Day in New York (the distraction they need) and the frantic goings on and near disasters are the bulk of the movie. This is not great cinema, but it is great fun anyway. We all harbor dark underbellies lusting for vengeance. It is human.

J. Edgar

Until now, I have never seen a movie that either starred Clint Eastwood or in later years was directed by him that I did not love. There is something satisfyingly unique yet very American about him and his work. This movie, however, was not successful. When I find myself squirming and thinking how long it is, there is trouble.

J. Edgar Hoover stamped his personality on the agency he pretty much shaped, the FBI. He not only gave teeth to what had been an ineffectual agency that could only \223investigate,\224 but managed to maintain his power for over 40 years, and through a succession of Presidents.

How he did this is a mixture of effectiveness (they were and still are) and blackmail, his well known secret files on every person of power in government for decades. He was much admired during his day\227and much feared.

This should have made a very interesting study of power and abuse of power, but Eastwood chose instead to focus on the rumors of a secret homosexual relationship that Hoover had with his Number 2, Clyde Tolson. The two were inseparable for decades, and there is plenty of suspicion but no hard proof. Although it is believable that Hoover had a problem with his sexuality conflicting with his chosen image, I did not find this the most compelling issue for a bio-pic.

The blackmailing was much more serious\227but even here, in the case of President Kennedy, who was not a sexually disciplined man, Hoover may have saved him from political disaster through his warning (and blackmailing) to Kennedy\222s brother Robert, the Attorney General who was about to cashier Hoover.

There was little in the film about the most shameful element of Hoover\222s paranoia, his suspicion of the Black Voting Rights campaign. He loathed Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, and there is a possibility of FBI involvement in the assassinations of both men. I would have been more interested in this than Hoover\222s hidden homosexuality.

Despite wonderful acting by Leonardo DiCaprio as Hoover and Josh Hamilton as his friend, Robert Irwin, the movie seemed flat and not engaging. Too bad.
Anonymous.

For the past century, conspiracy theorists have clung to the notion that William Shakespeare could not have written the plays and poetry that have made him recognized as perhaps the greatest literary genius of any time. This notion is also an indication of incredible snobbery that a person without an aristocratic education could possibly write so authentically about the ruling classes. The movie Anonymous promotes this ridiculous theory, even to the point that the Virgin Queen Elizabeth I had lovers and bore several children. If anybody knows about the claustrophobic environment that surrounded her from her youth, she would never have the privacy to be such a trollop. Furthermore, she knew that if any man had sexual authority over her, she would lose her power and become a wife, not a ruling queen. Too much to lose.

This supposed 16th century political thriller would have been entertaining had it not been such baloney. It was a waste of the artistic talent of Vanessa Redgrave as the old queen, Rhys Ifans (as the Earl of Oxford who was the supposed ghost writer behind Shakespeare) and Sebastian Armesto as the much lesser writer, Ben Johnson.

These conspiracy lovers obviously know little about 16th century England. Queen Elizabeth was the target of real Catholic conspiracies to assassinate her and revert Protestant England to Catholicism. She knew that Spain, France, and the Pope himself were her enemies after her ambassador to France told her about the horrific pogrom in France against the French Protestants (Huguenots). She immediately authorized a police state that watched everybody, looked for conspiracies, and realizing that she could not necessarily count on her nobility (some of whom were secretly Catholic), she had a national school system established in every town and village where intelligent boys could be groomed to serve the state. Out of this came the solid British middle class that served England until today.

Shakespeare was one of those bright boys, and he enjoyed a splendid education until his father ran into financial trouble and removed him from school. After that, Shakespeare was allowed to read in his local nobleman's great library. He did not need the university to make him well educated. He enjoyed amazing powers of observation and empathy through which he could imagine characters, from country bumpkins and cutthroats up to the top levels of royalty and the clergy. His characters ring true to this day. See Anonymous if you must, but do it holding your nose.