

THE CONSTANT GARDENER:

Based on a novel by John Le Carre, director Fernando Meirelles', "The Constant Gardener" is a slight step down from his brilliant and ferocious "City of God."

While "City of God" dealt with drugs and gangs in illegal actions, "The Constant Gardener" deals with legal but perhaps immoral activities of drug companies.

That "City of God" was a visual tour-de-force cannot be argued, but it also had a complete if downer story line. This film is a flimsy veiled love story that is actually an indictment against pharmaceuticals in particular and "advanced" countries in general by using and abusing impoverished nations.

The story begins at the end, if you will, and I think giving that away is not taking anything away from the movie. Ralph Fiennes plays Justin Quayle a British emissary, of what we never know. He has a brief love affair with Tessa (Rachel Weisz) and they marry. What happens at the beginning of the movie is that Tessa is mysteriously murdered.

Then, the movie coils around itself to the beginning of their ill-fated marriage. Justin is sent to Africa and Tessa pleads to go with him.

While there, the fiery Tessa becomes the focal point of the movie. She is a social worker who sees the injustice that drug companies are doing to the poor in Africa. They are the guinea pigs for medications that are not proven safe.

Much of the movie seems to be a polemic against drug companies by director Meirelles. We never feel the chemistry between Justin and Tessa. It all seems artificial, and in some ways, this feels like a quasi-documentary.

As Justin begins to find out more about his wife's involvement with the drug companies, we also get a brief glimpse at their mutual admiration for each other, but it doesn't feel like it's enough.

We find out more about Justin and Tessa but little that is useful. Justin becomes the prey.

The movie is labeled a thriller, but I found it to be more of a drama. And some of the characters only lend confusion to the grand scheme of things.

There is one scene in particular that still confuses. That's when Justin goes to meet a pharmaceutical executive and a British government official at a golf club. That sequence only confuses rather than elucidates anything.

Nonetheless, I found the visuals quite striking. Cinematographer Cesar Charlone has done a fabulous job, not only of depicting every day life of the poor and downtrodden, but his visual flair for keeping the lens swirling in an almost magical way.

Often, the camera swirls and follows its character, much like a snake slithering in the grass following its prey. The camera is placed at an angle. It is usually slightly out of focus. His visual style is unmistakable.

Director Meirelles' vision is powerful and forceful in telling his story. He has an affinity for the poor and helpless and it shows dramatically. He even takes a shot early on in the movie on Britain's role in Iraq.

In essence, the message is paramount. The characters are mere pawns. As a storyteller, Meirelles' delivery hits the bull's eye. In fact, it is the bulls' eye, and he's right on target.

The movie first and foremost has a political and moral agenda, driven by its visuals and surrounded by its unresolved and incomplete love story.

129 Minutes

MPAA Rating R: (for language, some violent images and sexual content/nudity)

RATING: B