

SYRIANA:

In the middle of "Syriana," I asked myself "What's going on and, whom am I rooting for?" You see writer/director Stephen Gaghan has created an intricate web where there are no good guys or bad guys as one would expect. Here are some quotes from the movie that exemplify the contradictions. There are just people who are doing their job. And, there are others who have a mission.

"The next life is the real life," says a Muslim zealot preaching to a young impressionable recruit.

"Capitalism is about destruction," says a Muslim businessman. Yet, the emir of an undefined Muslim country in the film says he loves America.

"Corruption is how we win," says an arrogant American businessman. In the meantime, a young American, Bryan Woodman (played by Matt Damon), tries to devise a strategy to help an aspiring emir develop his country through its wealth in oil.

The movie is about what Woodman calls the greatest asset the world has ever known-oil. And, it's a film about power, corruption, friendship and deceit to control it. It's about the have and the have-nots. And, it's all intertwined in religion and culture.

"Syriana," is built very much like the film "Traffic," which Gaghan also wrote the screenplay for. It is a series of vignettes all intended to build a story. But the pieces don't coalesce as a neat and tidy puzzle. Rather, they are loose fitting, yet the story does become understandable in the end. The film shifts between the Middle East and America many times as the players move about.

The film begins with two oil companies attempting to merge to become the fifth largest company in the U.S. The names are Connex and Killen. I thought it interesting that by shortening their names, one gets "con" and "kill."

Connex-Killen wants to make a deal with the Muslim country to control its resources of oil. But, politics and corruption stand in the way.

The film stars Robert Barnes (George Clooney) as a U.S. government official who begins to know too much about political intrigue between the Muslim country and the intentions of the U.S. government. Jimmy Pope (played by Chris Cooper) is the head of one of the oil companies who stands by the sidelines while deals are made. Bennett Holiday (Jeffrey Wright) plays a lawyer who makes deals and is caught in-between the deal makers. Dean Whiting (Christopher Plummer) is a government official who intends to destroy Barnes.

There are oil sheiks and emirs with conflicting interest who want to make business deals. And there are Muslim fanatics who want to preserve their country from western culture and piranhas that want to steal their treasure of oil.

While it is called fiction, I found the movie plausible in reality. And, the fact that so many people are making deals unbeknownst to others sends chills down ones spine. Just who controls the oil fields, and who are the power brokers?

I was once asked if I believed in conspiracies. I found the question too broad and didn't know how to answer. This movie dwells on several conspiracies in one movie. This movie answers that question.

Because of its complexities, intricate plot(s) and fascinating characters, it is one film that needs to be viewed again. It gives us an inside clue on several machinations about the oil business.

Most Americans do not understand why terrorism exists, and why we are hated so much around the world. One subplot in the movie is about how a young, seemingly innocent Muslim young man could carry out an act of terrorism. His "indoctrination" and "act" is revealing and devastating. By itself, it is worth the price of admission.

126 Minutes

MPAA Rating: R (for violence and language)

RATED: A-