

Stoic Gary Oldman Uncovers ‘Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on December 16, 2011 - 7:16am

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Espionage sure isn’t like it used to be. The new film “Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy” is set during the Cold War period of the early 1970s, when lines were drawn by their proximity in front of and behind the Iron Curtain. Gary Oldman plays an old British spook in this thriller adapted from the famous John le Carr  novel.

The title of the novel and film version has become a shorthand for describing a spy network and espionage circle. Without any knowledge of the plot in this work, I described another similar thriller as “a morality play by way of tinker-tailor-soldier-spy” The words in the title are intriguing enough to tantalize, and mysterious enough to arouse suspicion. They are also more provocative than this film version, which does entertain despite its maze of complexity, and also confounds due to a slow pace and British-like emotional atmosphere.

The “Circus” is the nickname for the British Secret Intelligence Service MI6, which is led by “Control” (John Hurt). When Control sends Agent Prideaux (Mark Strong) into Hungary to meet with a potential Soviet defector, a violent scene takes place, and that is enough of a transgression to force Control to give up his post. This sends the old guard from the WW2-era packing as well, including super spy George Smiley (Gary Oldman).



David Dencik (left) as Esterhase and Gary Oldman as George Smiley in ‘Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy’

Photo credit: Focus Features

There is suspicion that the Circus is harboring a mole – the term for double agent, a plant that is stealing strategies and giving them to the

Soviets. The undersecretary (Simon McBurney) secretly rehires Smiley to investigate the agency for that mole, and assigns younger agent Peter Guillam (Benedict Cumberbatch) to help him. The suspects are narrowed down to four of the inner circle – code name Tinker (Toby Jones as Alleline), Tailor (Colin Firth as Haydon), Soldier (Ciarán Hinds as Bland) and Poor Man (David Dencik as Esterhase). And finally, it might even be Smiley himself.

Director Tomas Alfredson takes an unraveling approach to story telling in revealing the mysteries in the investigation. The timeline shifts, with flashbacks sharing space with the present in the film, so attention must be closely paid. For the most part, the narrative keeps a tension that follows through to the end, and with each passing bit of information the “solution” makes sense by adding up the sum total of the building block scenarios within that tension.

The acting and casting choices are interesting, not because they are upstaging or performance-oriented but because they create shorthand visuals for their character types. Toby Jones is perfect as the prissy Tinker, John Hurt chews scenery in his madness as Control, Colin Firth cuts a fine figure as Tailor and the under-utilized Ciarán Hinds fills the bill for the code name of Soldier. They fulfill their on-screen personalities as much by our familiarity with their past acting roles as their situations within the film.

Gary Oldman has to hold it all together as George Smiley, and he overplays the weariness of the character, reducing his operation to a series of dry observations. His weakness is the love for his wife, which plays out in a couple of clever ways, but overall the character is almost like a background, third-hand observer. No one would ever accuse the British of over-emoting, but Oldman’s interpretation of Smiley takes it to a level of the stiffest upper lip.



Tailor: Colin Firth as Haydon in ‘Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy’
Photo credit: Focus Features

It might also take younger generations awhile to wrap their heads around the “Cold War” dilemmas. Where the film succeeds the most is in providing a glimpse into the paranoia of being a top spy in that era. There is no glamor to constant mistrust, and the story makes a strong case for the ridiculousness and imperfect humanness of “intelligence.” The cold warriors cannot even trust who they supposedly love, both in a relationship and collegial sense. There cannot be unconditional emotion when practicing espionage.

If you enjoy the secret agent thriller, this is smart and multi-layered, but it may be challenging for the attention deficiencies of our current age. With its many story loops and the stiff-backed stoicism of Gary Oldman, this film could turn out to be the “spy who lulled me.”

“Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy” continues its limited release in Chicago on December 16th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Gary Oldman, Mark Strong, John Hurt, Toby Jones, Ciarán Hinds, Benedict Cumberbatch and Colin Firth. Screenplay Adaptation by Bridget O’Connor and Peter Straughan. Directed by Tomas Alfredson. Rated “R”



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