

George Clooney Does it Italian Style in Excellent 'The American'

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – What if the most dangerous and pursued assassin in the world began to develop a flaw in his delivery, due to the vulnerability of simple human contact? Where does religion, carnality and love fit in that connection? George Clooney plays that assassin-type in "The American," holed up for one more job, the job that might answer both of those questions.

Clooney does an emotionless turn as the killer named Jack, who begins the film by killing three in a remote Swedish outpost, including a presumed lover. The Swedes are after him, for reasons unknown, and he escapes back to Rome to meet his vague contractor. There is another job, but he must hide out in a remote Italian village while handling it.

The village, picaresque and seemingly devoid of humanity, becomes the the place where Jack ends up. He meets his contact for the assignment, a beautiful femme fatale (Thelka Reuten), who gives him detailed instructions on building a specific weapon. Even though Jack wants to remain distant in this pursuit, he takes up with local priest named Father Benedetto (Paolo Bonacelli), who becomes a confidant and moral guidance counselor.

Jack also has a weakness for flesh, and the prostitute Clara (Violante Placido) becomes his favorite. After tussling again with the Swedes, it seems his cover has been blown, which his mysterious contractor calls "slipping." Paranoia starts to build as friend or foe becomes unclear, leaving Jack with a decision on how to deal with the complicated circumstance surrounding him.



Bang Bang Shoot Shoot: George Clooney as Jack in 'The American'
Photo Credit: © Focus Features

This is a beautifully rendered film, by cult director Anton Corbijn ("Control"), with several shots taking full advantage of the lush reality of the scenery. The character of Jack is often shot at a distance or looking very small, as if he is being watched by a higher power or authority. The camera is very voyeuristic, lingering on intimate moments or nakedness (with Placido's character there is ample appeal in this). The deliberateness of this approach allows the atmosphere to thicken with each scene, and gives a tremendous weight to Jack's every move.

The feel of the film seems also an homage to the post-WW2 Italian neorealism, as Clooney plays a strong lead against his romantic type, surrounded by actors who have a natural look and reality to them. The sole exception are the main female characters, both sumptuously beautiful, too beautiful for the characters that normally would represent their professions. This adds a fantasy element to Jack's situation, a set of conditions that become highly allegorical. A phallic-like firing pin after a lovemaking scene doesn't need Freud for elucidation. There are symbols of his ultimate fate everywhere, ripe with meaning.

Religious symbolism, for example – as represented by Father Bennedeto – is actually the most pragmatic metaphor in the film. Despite Jack's disconnection with everything, the priest appears at the most opportune moments for him, mostly with a lifeline to forgiveness. His representation as the "father," complete with a "son" who delivers some key equipment in Jack's assignment is a tremendously subtle depiction, but also so strong that the light of faith is given an essential role on the stage of the harsh realities being played out.

Clooney's performance as Jack is a reminder of his Michael Clayton character, which is not a favorable comparison. His stoic forbearance is too actor-like, almost method in its continuation. The shifts in hope that he goes through are significant and yet there is not enough external stimuli in his interpretation to communicate that hopefulness (which might be the point). There was one terrific scene, where Jack smiles for the only time in the film, a slight smile. It is through an introduction of one of Clara's friend, another impossibly beautiful woman, and his reaction is like a shy schoolboy.



Femme Fatale: Thekla Reuten as Mathilde in 'The American'
Photo Credit: © Focus Features

The pacing is slow, but having the pace of this cinematic work slowed down is necessary for the narrative, so that the secrets revealed give the proper shock. The killer Jack is in at a crossroads, and the nature of this particular limbo in a small, slowly paced Italian village is the perfect station before the next phase.

The American is a grand piece of movie opera, which even in its quietest moments has impact. It illustrates that life is often a series of events, crafted by the decisions and persons who cohabit within those decisions. We, like Jack, are moving down the path in our fateful journey.

*"The American" opens everywhere September 1st. Featuring George Clooney, Thekla Reuten, Paolo Bonacelli and Violante Placido..
Screenplay by Rowan Joffe, directed by John Anton Corbijn. Rated "R"*



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