

The American

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Who doesn't love George Clooney? He's normally involved in no fewer than two major projects each year (and each one usually very good). Last year, he was in three films: "Up in the Air" (for which he was nominated for an Academy Award) as well as "Fantastic Mr. Fox" and "The Men Who Stare at Goats," and throw in a guest appearance in the television drama "ER" where he had a recurring role early in his career.

In "The American," Clooney plays Jack, an assassin who is reaching the end of an illustrious career. After a botched job in Sweden, which opens the film, Jack escapes to Italy and awaits instructions for his next job. He receives his assignment and tells his boss he is making this one his last. During his stay, Jack begins seeing Clara (played by Italian actress Violante Placido), one of the town's prostitutes, and he is befriended by local priest, Father Benedetto (played by veteran Italian actor Paolo Bonacelli). Dutch actress Thekla Reuten plays Mathilde, the woman responsible for presenting Jack with his new assignment.

The cast in this film is one of the best, truly international ensembles seen from Hollywood in recent years. Much credit goes to Dutch director Anton Corbijn for keeping the flavor of this film authentic and certainly Euro-centric. Much of Corbijn's work previous to this was in musical documentaries and music videos, and the style of this film no doubt pulls from his skills honed during those projects. The film is beautifully shot and masterfully edited. Clooney is unusually muted in this film, but it's fitting to his character and he plays it well.

Despite all of this high praise, by the end of the film you're questioning motivation and wondering who was doing what to whom! Sure, Jack is an assassin, and certainly we don't expect all of the details surrounding his work (and surely what he considers to be his last assignment) to be anything but covert. What should never be covert is a character's motivation. I'm all in favor of plot twists, but only ones where the audience has a great big "ah-ha" moment (not a "scratch-your-head-wha??" moment). This detracts substantially from all the film's good qualities.

Film Fest Preview: One of the short films in the Festival this year is a "mob gem" called "Alienated." The comedy stars Vincent Pastore (best known as Big Pussy in the HBO series "The Sopranos"). Pastore plays a mob guy haunted by the presence of "foreign creatures" he cannot explain. Mr. Pastore will be joining us for the Festival!