The Constant Gardener
BY ROGER EBERT / September 1, 2005

They meet as strangers who plunge at once into sudden sex. They catch their breath, marry, and begin to learn about each other. Justin is an official in the British government. Tessa is an activist. She goes to Africa with Justin, her motives unclear in his mind, and witnesses what she thinks is murder in an African hospital. Then she is murdered at a crossroads, along with her African driver. And a doctor named Arnold, who she works with, is found dead, too.

But why, Justin needs to know, did Tessa receive an e-mail asking her, "What were you and Arnold doing in the Nairobi Hilton Friday night? Does Justin know?"

The murder of Tessa takes place right at the start of "The Constant Gardener," so it is not revealing too much to mention it. The movie is a progress back into her life, and a journey of discovery for Justin, who discovers a woman he never really knew. The flashback structure, told in remembered moments, passages of dialogue, scenes that are interrupted and completed later, is typical of John Le Carre, whose novels resemble chess problems in which one solution is elegant and all of the others take too many moves. It is a style suited to the gifts of the Brazilian director Fernando Meirelles, whose great "City of God" (2002) told a story that was composed of countless tributaries that all flowed together into a mighty narrative stream.

The fragmented style is the best way to tell this story, both for the novel and the movie. "The Constant Gardener" is not a logical exercise beginning with mystery and ending at truth, but a circling around an elusive conspiracy. Understand who the players are and how they are willing to compromise themselves, and you can glimpse cruel outlines beneath the public relations facade. As the drug companies pour AIDS drugs into Africa, are they using their programs to mask the testing of other drugs? "No drug company does something for nothing," Le Carre has a character observe.

"The Constant Gardener" may be the angriest story Le Carre has ever told. Certainly his elegant prose and the oblique shorthand of the dialogue shows the writer forcing himself to turn fury into style. His novel involves drug companies who test their products on the poor of the Third World and are willing to accept the deaths that may occur because, after all, those people don't count. Why not? Because no one is there to count them.

Do drug companies really do this? The recent verdict against the makers of Vioxx indicates that a jury thought Merck sold a drug it knew was dangerous. Facts are the bones beneath the skin of a Le Carre novel. Either he knows what he's talking about, or he is uncommonly persuasive in seeming to. "The Constant Gardener" plays at times like a movie that will result in indictments. What makes the film extraordinary is that it also plays as a love story, and as an examination of the mysteries of the heart.

The performances need to be very good to carry us through sequences in which nobody, good or evil, seems very sure of the total picture. Ralph Fiennes plays Justin as a bureaucrat who seems detached from issues; he's the opposite of Tessa. As he tries to get to the bottom of her death, he sifts through his discoveries like an accountant unwilling to go home for the day until the books are balanced.

One way of looking at Tessa's death is that she was a hothead who had an affair with a handsome African man, went where she shouldn't have and got caught in one of those African border killings where toll-collecting soldiers with AK-47s enforce whatever they think is the law. Another way to look at it is to give her the benefit of the doubt. To wonder what was behind the embarrassing questions she asked at a press conference. To ask why statistics seem to be missing, if a drug study is designed to generate them.

As he probes through the wreckage of his wife's life, Justin encounters an array of characters who could have been airlifted in from Graham Greene -- or from other Le Carre novels, of course. Hubert Kounde plays Arnold Bluhm, the African who is not, in fact, Tessa's driver, but a doctor who is her colleague. Danny Huston, tall and courtly like his father, John, and like John often smiling at a private joke, plays Sandy Woodrow, the British high commissioner on the scene. Bill Nighy, that actor who often seems to be frowning through a migraine, is Sir Bernard Pellegrin, head of the Foreign Office, and thus Justin and Sandy's boss. And Pete Postlethwaite, looking as if he has been left out too long in the weather, is Lorbeer, a drug company man who works in the field -- at what, it is dangerous to say.

"The Constant Gardener" begins with a strong, angry story, and peoples it with actors who let it happen to them, instead of rushing ahead to check off the surprises. It seems solidly grounded in its Kenyan locations; like "City of God," it feels organically rooted. Like many Le Carre stories, it begins with grief and proceeds with sadness toward horror. Its closing scenes are as cynical about international politics and commerce as I can imagine. I would like to believe they are an exaggeration, but I fear they are not. This is one of the year's best films.

http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20050901/REVIEWS/50826001/1023

August 31, 2005
MOVIE REVIEW | 'THE CONSTANT GARDENER'
Digging Up the Truth in a Heart of Darkness
By A. O. SCOTT

Ralph Fiennes has a peculiar kind of negative charisma. In his best performances, he commands the screen by deflecting attention, as though he wished the camera could hide him from our scrutiny rather than exposing him to us. It is hard to think of another movie actor who can be so convincingly shy, so protective of the psychological privacy of his characters.

In "The Constant Gardener," Fernando Meirelles's excellent adaptation of John le Carré's novel, Mr. Fiennes plays Justin Quayle, a British diplomat whose surname hardly suggests strength or decisiveness. Justin's main qualities seem, at least at first, to be diffidence, his interest in gardening and a fumbling, self-effacing kindness. His words half swallowed, his features perpetually tinged with guilt, Justin is temperamentally unsuited to being the hero of a globe-trotting political thriller, which is part of why "The Constant Gardener" is an unusually satisfying example of the genre.

Another reason is that, unlike most other recent examples - "The Interpreter," Sydney Pollack's hectic and empty star vehicle for Nicole Kidman and Sean Penn comes to mind - Mr. Meirelles's film actually bothers to say something about global politics. If what it says provokes some indignant rebuttal (be on the lookout for op-ed columns and public relations bulletins challenging its dire view of big pharmaceutical companies), so much the better. In pointedly applying President Bush's phrase "axis of evil" to multinational corporations rather than to rogue states, the movie shows a willingness to risk didacticism in the service of encouraging discussion. This strikes me as noble, but it would also strike me as annoying if Mr. Meirelles were not such a skilled and subtle filmmaker, and if his cast were not so sensitive and sly.

There is more to the film than a twisting plot and a topical hook, and also more than visual bravura, colorful locations and fine, mostly British, acting. (Danny Huston is superbly creepy as Justin's two-faced friend and colleague, and the incomparable Bill Nighy shows a knack for soft-spoken villainy that makes you wish for a dozen sequels.) This is a supremely well-executed piece of popular entertainment that is likely to linger in your mind and may even trouble your conscience. Which is only proper, since the theme of the film, as of Mr. le Carré's novel, is the uneasy, divided conscience of the liberal West.

Fittingly enough for a man in his profession, Justin is a creature of moderation and compromise, apparently without strong views of his own. His young wife, Tessa (Rachel Weisz), is another story. They meet at a lecture Justin is giving on British foreign policy, after which Tessa angrily, tearfully challenges Britain's participation in the war in Iraq, as if embodying the caricature of people who hold such views as shrill hysterics. Her outburst, which clears the room, provokes an oddly sympathetic reaction in Justin - a desire to comfort and protect this furious (and also very pretty) antagonist. For her part, Tessa finds something attractive about his solicitude, and his refusal to take offense. "I feel safe with you," she says after they make love for the first time, and he, without saying as much, clearly feels more alive with her.

But for most of the movie, which is an elegant origami of flashbacks and foreshadowings, Tessa is dead, murdered in the Kenyan wilderness, where she had gone with a Belgian doctor of African ancestry named Arnold Bluhm (Hubert Koundé), who many in the Nairobi expatriate community assumed was her lover. In that cozy, gossipy world, where the habits of colonial rule seem to have adapted themselves easily to the requirements of do-gooder paternalism, Tessa was always something of a scandalous woman, puncturing the hypocritical politesse of cocktail parties with rude questions about money, power, poverty and disease. She preferred to spend her time - usually in the company of Dr. Bluhm - wandering through slums and villages, where, especially while pregnant, she cut a somewhat self-consciously saintly figure.

One easy criticism of "The Constant Gardener" is that like so many other movies of its kind, it uses the misery of the developing world as an exotic backdrop for a story about the travails of white people. Fair enough, except that it is precisely the moral failures and obligations of the wealthy world that are at issue here. It is also worth noting that Mr. Meirelles is from Brazil, a country whose social and political landscape may resemble Kenya's more than Britain's. One cannot help but feel that his camera - operated by the exceptionally gifted Uruguayan cinematographer César Charlone - feels more at home in the rusty heat of Africa than in the chilly, gray austerity of Europe. There is, in his beautiful, crowded frames, a palpable tension between foreground and background, a sense that the real human scale of the story is not to be found in the fates of Justin and Tessa, however affecting these may be.

This is, in other words, a movie acutely aware of its own limitations. Mr. Meirelles's previous film, "City of God," a Scorsesean epic of the Rio slums, also tried to embed social concern within the conventions of pop filmmaking. It was a bit of an awkward fit, especially at those moments where the horror of real-world brutality shattered the gangster bravado. This time, constrained by the screenwriter Jeffrey Caine's nimble streamlining of Mr. le Carré's book, the director manages a more consistent tone, and implies more violence than he shows. There are nonetheless scenes - in particular a rebel raid on a refugee camp in Sudan - whose sheer cinematic intensity makes them more dazzling than appalling.

But that is always the risk of making entertainment out of the world's trouble, an undertaking that is nonetheless worthwhile and that few have pursued as long or as well as Mr. le Carré. The world has changed since the end of the cold war, which was his great subject, and "The Constant Gardener" can stand as an example of how thriller-making has become more difficult. Mr. le Carré's

novels of East-West espionage were exercises in speculative realism; it was always possible to imagine that something like the chess games between Smiley and Karla were really going on behind the scenes. It is harder to take literally what happens in this film. The premise is that the profiteering impulses of global capitalism (thuggishly embodied by Gerard McSorley's drug-company executive) are enabled by the diplomacy and trade policy of Western governments. This seems quite plausible. Less so is the idea that this collusion is propelled by conspiracy, skulduggery and murder. Given the power of the villains and the weakness of the victims, it would hardly need to be.

So it may be best to take the cloak-and-dagger elements of "The Constant Gardener," and the vision of justice with which it concludes, as metaphors, symbolic crystallizations of a reality too complex and diffuse to be dramatized by more empirical means. Justin Quayle, then, is an allegorical figure, an emblem of timid virtue roused to heroic action by the discovery of his own complicity with evil.

"The Constant Gardener"
By Stephanie Zacharek

Aug 31, 2005 | In a remark that may be more clever than it is true, Katharine Hepburn said of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, "She gave him sex; he gave her class." In Fernando Meirelles' adaptation of John le Carré's "The Constant Gardener," Rachel Weisz doesn't need class. But Ralph Fiennes needs sex, and part of the wonder of this earnest, carefully crafted political thriller is the way Weisz draws out in him a guarded sensuality that's all the more affecting for how tentative it is.

Weisz and Fiennes play husband and wife: He's a quiet, decent English diplomat, with the pheasant-under-glass name Justin Quayle, who believes he knows how the world works; Weisz is Tessa, an activist who actually goes out into that world to shake it apart. And while the "constant gardener" of the title is most obviously Quayle (he spends much more time fussing over his rhododendrons than effecting diplomacy), it's Tessa who does the more constant tending, and not just when it comes to sexual nurturing: The grand, dark joke of the movie is that it's she who exterminates his political naiveti, as if it were a deadly garden plague.

"The Constant Gardener" is a political thriller in which love saves the day, sort of, but we're talking about a deeply pragmatic kind of romanticism: This is love harnessed in the service of muckraking. Meirelles made waves a few years ago with "City of God," about a gang of kids running wild in a Rio de Janeiro slum, a picture that managed a rough kind of vitality in the corners -- in other words, when Meirelles wasn't meticulously drawing our attention to the grittiness of the story. Oddly, or maybe not, Meirelles is better at adapting le Carré: Instead of just riffing on stereotypes of English repression, he seems to understand that repression actually reinforces, rather than negates, the presence of sexuality. (If it weren't there in the first place, what would there be to repress?)

Meirelles is way too fond of jiggly hand-held-camera effects -- the camera is much more effective at capturing the subterranean emotional turbulence of the story when it's held steady. But he is in tune with his lead actors, and they're beautifully in tune with each other: Fiennes, for once, plays a man instead of a stick figure; even his seemingly toothless, jack-o'-lantern smile carries a hint of sadness here, instead of seeming like a liability he can't help, as it usually does. And Weisz, always a lively and appealing actress, is compelling here in a way she's never been before. Her character dies in the movie's early minutes (that's not a spoiler -- her death is the event that sets the picture in motion), but she lives on in flashbacks. Each time she appears, the movie gets a few more gradations of light and texture, and a few more provocative angles. Meirelles uses her scenes as if they were multidimensional, Escher-like building blocks, each one a mystery by itself, reaching up toward a shimmery conclusion.

As the movie opens, Tessa is headed for a remote reach of Kenya with her colleague, a doctor named Arnold (Hubert Koundé). It's not immediately clear to us exactly what their work is, because Quayle doesn't know, either: He and Tessa, after an unlikely courtship, have married and come to Africa together. In a flashback scene, we see Tessa, before their marriage, begging Quayle to take her along. Quayle, surprised but intrigued by the proposition, mutters something about how they hardly know each other. "You could learn me," she implores, and a cautious flicker of a smile crosses his face, the first clue we get that her impetuousness speaks to something deep inside his solid heart.

It turns out that Tessa has come too close to unlocking a secret involving a pharmaceutical conglomerate. But Tessa's death reveals some other secrets to Quayle, and out of frustration, grief and an anger he doesn't want to allow himself to feel, he sets out to unearth the truth behind some of the mysteries she has left in her wake.

While Tessa sees bureaucracy as the enemy, Quayle is the sort of man who has always had faith in the system, and not just because it has given him such a comfortable life. He needs to believe in a sense of order -- he needs to believe that, with some brainpower and a bit of paperwork, everything will shake out right in the end. Although that may sound like stereotypically English stiff-upper-lip machismo, in Quayle it's the exact opposite: Unlike Tessa, Quayle is far too sensitive to face up to chaos. "The Constant Gardener" goes beyond making the point that the political is personal; it shows how the bureaucratic can be personal too -- the mechanics of the system can be a comfort to us not necessarily because we're lazy or uncaring, but because without them, we're not

really sure how to proceed. (As Fiennes' superior, Danny Huston, in a rather too-large supporting role, comes much closer to a blobby version of the stiff-upper-lip cliché.)

Through much of "The Constant Gardener," Quayle is the very definition of uncertainty. This is a mystery, but the biggest question is not the exact nature of the corruption Tessa was about to uncover before her death (that's revealed fairly early in the plot); it's how far Quayle will go to set things right. This is a picture with a slow-burning sense of outrage: It's not nearly as passionate as, say, last year's "Hotel Rwanda." (What's more, it's not based on a true story -- although the movie's end credits include a note from le Carré, stating that even though his story isn't based on actual events, his research into the workings of pharmaceutical companies suggest that their practices may be even more heinous than what he's shown us.)

Even so, this is a picture with sturdy liberal underpinnings: It's just that Meirelles and screenwriter Jeffrey Caine do their crusading quietly, instead choosing to put most of the focus on the actors, and not just on the leads. Some of the movie's secondary characters increase its potency exponentially, considering they have relatively little screen time: The always-astonishing Bill Nighy appears as a lizardy high government muckety-muck -- he pulls off the amazing feat of uttering most of his lines while barely parting his teeth. And British stage actor Richard McCabe has a lovely turn as Tessa's cousin, Ham: In just a few small scenes he delineates the close kinship that sometimes thrives between people who've known each other all their lives.

Meirelles clearly trusts his actors, particularly Fiennes and Weisz: The plot of "The Constant Gardener" is fairly intricate, but in the end, the story is told mostly in their faces. Weisz has never been better: She's joyously expressive and alive, but there's gravity beneath that milkmaid complexion. She's grounded even when she's being flirtatious. And Fiennes has never been more moving: Occasionally, Quayle looks at Tessa with a kind of helplessness -- not weakness, but simply an inability to reconcile what's so wondrous about her with the clear-cut, organized world he so deeply believes in. In the end, he realizes that there's no reconciliation between the two. She's his tragedy, his salvation and his perfect partner: He does everything she does, only backward, and in oxfords.

http://dir.salon.com/story/ent/movies/review/2005/08/31/constant_gardener/index.html?CP=IMD&DN=110

Something's rotten...
By Joanne Laurier
6 September 2005

"Quayles always make reliable servicemen." Thus Sir Bernard Pellegrin of the British Foreign Office describes the lineage of Justin Quayle, the "constant gardener" of the title. In fact, events will oblige Justin to break the long-term pattern of constancy and reliability—qualities demanded of a diplomat/bureaucrat serving the interests of British imperialism.

John le Carré's novel of political intrigue, *The Constant Gardener*, has been adapted for the screen by Brazilian director Fernando Meirelles (*City of God*). The movie opens with the murder of Tessa Quayle (Rachel Weisz), the wife of Justin (Ralph Fiennes), a British diplomat in Kenya. As the latter begins looking into Tessa's death, as well as the disappearance of her traveling companion and fellow activist, Dr. Arnold Bluhm (Hubert Koundé), he discovers that the two were on the verge of exposing a drug-testing program that killed some of the Africans it used as unwitting guinea pigs.

An "axis of evil" is in operation: Dypraxa, a drug for tuberculosis manufactured by KDH and distributed in Africa by the House of 3 B's. The slogan of the "big pharma" company is "The World is Our Clinic." Indeed, as the company races to have its treatment for the disease approved, it doctors the negative test results with the complicity of the British High Commission in Nairobi. Many of the drug's recipients are already dying of the African scourge, AIDS, which means that any of Dypraxa's injurious or fatal side effects can be concealed. "We're not killing people who are not already dead," callously declaims Sandy Woodrow (Danny Huston), the Head of Chancery.

Predicted to be the future global pandemic, tuberculosis represents megabucks with Dypraxa positioned to shoot into the realm of blockbuster drugs. In the interests of this potential jackpot, no obstacles, such as Tessa ("that rarest thing: a lawyer who believes in justice") can be tolerated.

The drug's inventor, Dr. Marcus Lorbeer (Pete Postlethwaite)—in self-imposed exile in a remote Sudanese desert—was one of the last persons to meet with Tessa before her death. He is in possession of a document that points a finger at the complicity of the British state in her death. When Justin succeeds by way of a pharma-watchdog group in Germany in locating Lorbeer, he obtains the goods, allowing him to blow the whistle, as much for Tessa as for the drug-trial's numerous victims.

Lorbeer sums up one of the film's central themes: "Pharmaceuticals are right up there with arms dealers."

Meirelles has legitimately interpreted le Carré's intricately plotted thriller. Kenya's slums and villages and Sudan's terrifying desert with its long-abandoned population are wrenching. Reportedly, actors Fiennes and Weisz were so shocked by Kenya's poverty that they set up a trust fund to provide aid to the slum that features prominently in the film. Weisz told an interviewer, "In the slum of Kabira we saw a level of poverty that I don't think anyone had seen before. There's a million people living in a very small space with no running water, no electricity, no sanitation, with a very high level of disease and HIV."

Cast and crew contributed to *The Constant Gardener* Trust financing a bridge, schooling costs, road building and community groups

in east Kenya. Producer Channing-Williams stated, "These are places where people are seriously, seriously poor and deprived, and water is at a dreadful premium. A lot of people were astounded by what they saw and wanted to do something about it."

The actors bring this empathy to their performances. Fiennes and Weisz are affecting. Weisz's brief interactions with Kenyan children (some of which were apparently not scripted) make an impression. British Foreign Office representatives are sufficiently cold-blooded and calculating, without losing all traces of humanity. The actors don't hold back in their depiction of colonialist condescension, tipped towards revulsion, when dealing with the African poor.

When veteran British spy Donohue (Donald Sumpter) tells Justin that there is a contract out on him in Africa and coolly says, "Getting people out of countries is one of the few things we still do well," one feels a blast from the old Empire. Maneuvers between Her Majesty's cunning servants, the corrupt Kenyan officials and the cutthroat minions of big Pharma are convincingly enacted.

In the character of Sir Kenneth Curtiss, actor Gerard McSorley (last seen in *Omagh*, in a strikingly different role) embodies the nasty, sordid head of the drug distributor, 3 B's. Pete Postlethwaite as Lorbeer, who opportunistically headed up the Dypraxa tests and then runs off to hide out in the depths of Sudan, delivers a strikingly complex performance. Existing as a walking encyclopedia of the pharmaceutical corporation's dirty work, his days are numbered.

The relationship between the former colonial master and the corrupt representatives of the Kenyan state is brought out nicely in a scene where Justin is arrested by local police. "For a diplomat, you are not a very good liar," says one of the latter; Justin responds, "I haven't risen very high."

In general, the performances of an outstanding group of British actors tend to rise above the limitations of the script, including an unnecessary number of clichés, and its direction.

In *The Constant Gardener*, the first meeting between Justin and Rachel stands out. Justin, having delivered a drab, abstract lecture on the "art" of British diplomacy, is verbally attacked by audience member Rachel: Why, she asks angrily, is Britain embroiled in Iraq—Vietnam the sequel? How does the lecturer justify the British government's killing of thousands of people for oil and a photo-op on the White House lawn? Rachel then goes on to advocate a policy that lamely involves the United Nations. Nonetheless, her point about the war in Iraq hits home.

Without disclosing too much, mention should be made of the film's final sequence, a deviation from the novel. Although the scene perhaps tips the scale toward an overly satisfying emotional catharsis, there is something to be said for the blunt exposure of the Foreign Office's Pellegrin (Bill Nighy), a high-level official preparing for a new career with pharmaceutical giant KDH.

Having floated the lie that Justin committed suicide, Pellegrin goes on to describe the murdered diplomat as the quintessential representative of his profession—someone who is courteous, self-effacing and would not have inconvenienced Her Majesty's Government; in fact, says Pellegrin, nothing gave credit to his life so much as the way he ended it. The truth about Justin's fate at the hand of the British state, together with a condemnation of the deaths "from lives that are bought so cheaply" to benefit the "civilized world," dramatically closes the film.

The decision to film this novel is not insignificant. After four decades of writing fiction, le Carré is an insightful and talented novelist with intimate knowledge of the workings of the British state and the ruling elite as a whole. The publication of *The Constant Gardener* in 2001 was preceded by an article in the *Daily Telegraph*, entitled, "The Criminals of Capitalism," in which le Carré condemned "the conviction that, whatever profit-driven corporations do in the short term, they are ultimately motivated by ethical concerns, and their influence on the world is therefore beneficial, and so God help us all." Le Carré continued, "It seemed to me, as I began to cast around for a story to illustrate the example, that the pharmaceutical industry offered the most eloquent example."

Le Carré's book is based on documented cases, such as trials that the pharmaceutical giant Pfizer carried out in Nigeria during an epidemic of bacterial meningitis. The drug company administered to sick children an antibiotic that was banned for treatment of meningitis in the West. Despite its having been shown to cause damage to the joints and potentially to produce arthritis, Pfizer's tests were directed towards obtaining licensing for a wider use of the drug. Records indicate that the deaths of patients were kept anonymous and recorded only as numbers. Without follow-up treatment for the trials' survivors, there exists no official record of the long-term impact of the drug.

The filmmakers have made a conscious connection with the objective situation. They are not simply stumbling around in the dark like so many of their colleagues. There are certain objective landmarks in the film; definite social and material interests are represented.

Certain social types—corporate director, spy, diplomat, radical activist, political hit man— are delineated. Various issues arise, most essentially the role of transnational corporations, in the form of the pharmaceuticals, backed by the great powers. The ravaging of Africa by these forces and the desperate condition of its population are deeply felt. What type of society allows this to take place? What is the remedy?—are some of the questions that arise both logically and emotionally.

The film's remarkable cast labor with considerable diligence and conscientiousness, obviously affected by the extreme distress of the Kenyan population. It is within the core of the performances that one senses the growing global opposition to the Iraq war. A growing unease over the state of the world is to be welcomed.

As in the book, Justin Quayle is not a fully formed character and never really comes to life, but rather functions as something of a

congealed plot device. His transition from formless, invisible civil servant (and "gardener") to an unstoppable—almost reckless—force raging against the machine at times stretches credulity. The depiction of his relationship with Tessa—the vital *raison d'être* for his personality about-face—contains some of the film's weakest and least dramatic arrangements.

Why did Meirelles opt for such jittery camera-work and a fragmented approach? The director might consider it artistically fashionable, given that *City of God*, his previous film about Brazil's slums, was essentially made in this manner. Perhaps he is fascinated with new methods of narrative. He might argue that he is not interested in the social realism of the past and that only this oblique, indirect manner of telling a story is appropriate to our "new global reality" and new media, and so forth. Be that as it may, does this fragmentation help or hinder in relating the drama?

In the most obvious sense, it obstructs the viewer from experiencing, except fleetingly, the characters' inner world, as well as the film's more suggestive images.

One feels dissatisfied as well by the level of interaction with the Kenyans, who function more or less as background material. This reveals something about the director's political outlook—his sympathy for but essential distance from what he terms the "underdogs" of society. The same problems were present in his depiction of the slum dwellers in *City of God*.

While the director is not obliged to come up with a solution to the problems he chooses to focus on, one feels that Meirelles is made somewhat nervous by the seriousness of the concerns raised in the film—what is to de done with giant conglomerates that dominate the globe and wreak havoc on the world's population? How to proceed against their plundering? Unfortunately, the fragmentation and relentless chop-editing function primarily to deflect attention from these weighty matters.

The film raises issues for which there is no simple solution, but distracting the audience with cinematic pyrotechnics doesn't help. It would be better, for example, to explain that this reality is difficult, that there are no quick fixes, or that a handful of outraged activists with slogans is not enough to make things right.

The Constant Gardener disturbs, lingers in the mind, for its images of Africa, images of corporate thuggery, images of well-meaning people drowning in their own self-deception (Woodrow), for its inner look at the machinations of imperialism with its mendacious servants, and so forth. Society is in deep crisis, and cinema is called on to continuously address this fact.

The Constant Gardener
By Steve Brennan
Wednesday, 07 September 2005

It was Dean Acheson who said "Great Britain has lost an empire and not yet found a role." In Fernando Meirelles's adaptation of John Le Carré's novel "The Constant Gardener," the British diplomats stationed in Kenya have taken the role of spineless entrepreneurs, using HIV infected Kenyans as guinea pigs for cheap, harmful pharmaceuticals. Of course the pharmaceutical companies pay government officials handsomely for the opportunity. "We have to be rich before we help the poor" is the general belief of this slimy lot. But when foreign office middle man Justin Quayle (Ralph Fiennes) discovers that his wife Tess (Rachel Weisz) has been murdered because of her investigation into the treatment of "disposable drugs for disposable people," he continues her mission himself, simultaneously discovering that everything he thought he knew was wrong.

Meirelles' last picture, "City of God," was a Molotov cocktail of documentary realism, personal bio-pic and crime thriller, a riotous exposé of inner-city Rio. However, whereas "City of God" blazed onto screens like an unquenchable inferno, his latest effort is much more of a damp squib. Not that the film isn't without its merits. Meirelles' and cinematographer Cesar Charlone's use of color on the screen is simply amazing—stark yellows, radiant reds and brilliant blues are juxtaposed with black faces in the hustle and bustle of the Kenyan shantytowns. London, by comparison, is portrayed in cold grays, and drawn faces have the complexion of rigor mortis.

However, like many Le Carré adaptations, the plot creaks along at a frustratingly cumbersome pace. Intriguing developments of the first hour of aren't built upon or concluded sufficiently in the second, and while Meirelles' aesthetics provide genuine amazement early on, they later slow the narrative down even further.

A stellar cast does their best to add a third dimension to their roles, but flaccid dialogue and some very tedious scenes make this very difficult. Bill Nighy, whose increased visibility on the big screen is most welcome, adds snarl but is constrained by far too little screen time. Danny Houston does a decent job as the back-stabbing, pen-pushing Sandy. But again, despite the actor's best efforts, his role fails to bloom.

Le Carré's spies and maverick diplomats flatten on the big screen, as if by sacrificing a normal life by joining the Foreign Office, they also sacrifice a personality. Indeed, the U.K. foreign office must have the dullest office parties around. Not that we necessarily need to see Miss Moneypenny sitting on the photocopier in her underwear, but just a memorable scene or two, some engaging, fuller dialogue, or at least a plot that is not so dependent on such sketchily drawn characters to carry it.

Nevertheless, Fiennes especially tries to eke a character progression in his portrayal of Quayle. Beginning as an apologist for British foreign policy, Fiennes' delivery more than smacks of the nervy, articulate but ultimately empty utterances of current Prime Minister Tony Blair. His evolution from mild-mannered, rather wimpy foreign office apologist to mild-mannered, rather wimpy foreign office renegade just about keeps things going in the dreary second half of the picture. Weisz is similarly impressive as the angry and impassioned yet reckless Tess, whose intuitive tendencies set up the film so well.

Their relationship is at the film's heart, but unfortunately the romance never seems plausible in the first place. While Quayle inanely grins over his geraniums and Tess attempts to bring down the British Foreign Office, what they are doing together is not exactly obvious.

Not that this is a bad film. It just could have been so much better. Despite the political backdrop of greedy CEOs and soulless politicians, relevant political matters are addressed in such a wishy-washy manner that it's difficult to determine who we should be blaming. While a thriller doesn't need Bond to be successful, it needn't be as tired as this to be taken seriously.

http://www.wirenh.com/Film/Film_Review/The_Constant_Gardener_20050907710.html

---

The Constant Gardener
by Cynthia Fuchs
PopMatters Film and TV Editor

Generous

For a movie starring Ralph Fiennes, The Constant Gardener begins with an unusual bang. Specifically, a violent car crash, the camera flipping over and over, the shots too close to show who's involved or how the accident happens. Minutes later, word gets back to Justin (Fiennes) that his wife Tessa (Rachel Weisz) has been killed in the wreck. After a moment, the painfully proper Justin thanks the poor fellow who delivers the news.

Justin's story doesn't actually start with Tessa's death, but it takes such a drastic turn that, as the film presents it, all events before and after converge at that harrowing point. Directed with signature smart ferocity by Fernando Meirelles (City of God), Constant Gardener traces Justin's shift from trusting, go-along bureaucrat to skeptical, resolute, and increasingly fervent investigator. After he gleans from scant clues that Tessa's death was the result of her own investigation -- into the nefarious collusions of international drug corporations and first world governments -- Justin determines to solve the crime. His transition is surely rooted in the movie's source, a 2001 John Le Carré novel, but it hardly leads to the usual action-packing. Indeed, Justin is more melancholy than heroic, and The Constant Gardener is more meditative than thrilling.

This somber tone is only partly a function of Justin's discovering Tessa had secrets from him. Or rather, he guessed that she did before she died, and even attempted to force her to confess details. But she's not forthcoming, believing he won't be able to handle the sheer scope of the villainy she's fighting, and so incrementally. Frustrated but hopeful, Tessa is, in flashbacks, something of an opposite of her husband, who remains dour and taut, focused on his gardening. For him, this activity is all about perfecting the unruly, labeling and tending to needy but undemanding entities.

The film, however, integrates these bits of thoughtful control with more unmanageable, psychic elements, Justin's emotional life that he hardly knows exists until he meets Tessa. After her death, he can no longer contain himself, and like him the movie turns increasingly inward, even as it exposes broad-based corruption and indicts British officials. Justin and Tessa's unlikely but strangely convincing romance jumpstarts his internal journey. Their flashbacked first meeting showcases their opposing temperaments and political inclinations, as she challenges a lecture he's reading for an absent diplomat, specifically taking issue with its defense of the U.S. invasion of Iraq (clearly an updated addition to the novel).

Flummoxed and smitten at once, Justin backtracks awkwardly, gathering up his briefcase and papers as they agree to keep talking, even to date. He insists that he really believes her rather than his colleague, and soon enough, they're finding out all the ways that sensual, passionate, wholly pleasurable love can overcome politics. As these scenes of early affection appear in flashbacks, they are fragmented and lovely, even poetic, in particular a couple of images that repeat: in one, they laugh and caress underneath white sheets, the light vaguely angelic, and in another, she's hugely pregnant, toweling herself off after a bath, and he/the camera glimpses her through the doorway, looking like home movies and here framed on a threshold, just out of reach and absolutely at ease with her own moment. When he thanks her for "this wonderful gift" of herself, she laughs, "How very generous of me." She gets the joke of thinking too much of herself, as well-off white people tend to do, but still, she appreciates his solidity, no matter how naïve it might be. "I feel safe with you," she tells him, granting him an identity he hadn't thought of for himself.

Recalling her so brilliantly energetic and blaming himself for not keeping her "safe," Justin makes himself miserable, but also pushes himself to pursue whatever "truth" he imagines exists. He tells himself he wants to continue her work, and assign proper blame to the villains, but he also wants to learn what exactly she thought was too arduous for him to bear, whether that was an affair with a doctor with whom she traveled, the charismatic Arnold (Hubert Koundé), or betrayals by his own supposed friends, including Sandy Woodrow (Danny Huston), acting Head of the British High Commission.

Justin's adventure takes him to Kenya, where Tessa first traveled with him for his dry government business (he's a mid-ranking career diplomat with the High Commission in Nairobi). Here the movie takes off visually, contrasting the interiors of urban, well-heeled London with vast landscapes and poverty, at once breathtaking and oppressive. Meirelles and City of God cinematographer César Charlone keep the frame a little frantic, close on faces, following and anticipating movement, intimating both the local devastation and the personal tolls taken by Tessa and Justin's differing reactions to what they witness.

Tessa understands how to read her adopted world, intuitively and by her hanging-with-the-natives experience, pictured as montagey exchanges, as she and Arnold visit with children and patients. She responds to people in pain with compassion, looking to save any one of the victims she might get her arms around. Justin, fretful and jealous now, keeps his distance, declaring that because their efforts would be futile against the tide of suffering, they can't insert themselves in the locals' unhappy lives.

Justin will learn a lesson about this, too late to save Tessa or those she tries so desperately to help, or even to save himself. The too-lateness makes its own point, about the relentlessness of systems, including bodily (AIDS, tuberculosis), political (Justin's coworkers), and corporate (the multinational pharmaceuticals, or pharmas).

At the same time, the film falls into another familiar and rather discouraging system, that of mass media representations. Much as Tessa and Justin work as characters (thanks to subtle performances by both actors), they are troubling as bits of the larger text. They're yet another set of white figures used to dramatize, frame and make marketable a black African story. Yes, the pharmas and the government officials are bad, as are the African warlords' horseback thugs, hacking away at villagers, angry over money, over their own paucity, the orders they're enacting. They're frightening, wraithlike figures, galloping into frame on horseback, dust billowing and orange horizon burning. But even as he observes this mayhem, even seems about to be caught up in it, Justin remains obsessed with finding an answer to a Tessa mystery, so driven that he can't help others. This is the tragedy, that his desire to help her, to save himself in her loss, so overtakes him that he appears the very white Western emblem of oppression that he rejects. He is not, and you know that. He's a victim, a bystander who steps up after the evil is done. But he looks the part, and against this African backdrop, where Africans serve as occasion for his story, his anguish seems almost quaint. The forces set against him are overwhelming. And that might be the film's most potent insight, that the white guy cannot save the day.

— 30 August 2005
http://popmatters.com/film/reviews/c/contstant-gardener.shtml

---

The Constant Gardener
Love focuses fight against corporate marauders in Africa
By Mick LaSalle, San Francisco Chronicle Movie Critic
Wednesday, August 31, 2005

"The Constant Gardener," based on a John Le Carré novel, is a movie about greed and political intrigue that's played out over two continents. It's a love story only in passing. And yet the love story is what lingers in the mind and gives energy and meaning to everything that happens on-screen.

It unites Ralph Fiennes and Rachel Weisz who, in their first love scene - - shot in a white room -- look like the palest English people on the planet. They also look like two people meant to be together. The scene follows their first meeting, which is more than the usual obligatory clash. He is a junior diplomat giving a lecture, and she is in the audience, berating him vociferously about Britain's participation in the Iraq war. She is almost out of control, and he is almost too much in control. They look at each other and see what's missing in their own nature.

Fiennes can be an austere actor, but this role calls for different notes, a softness, almost a sweetness. He plays Justin, a diplomat sent to Africa in the British foreign service, with a specific and rather interesting form of diffidence -- as interesting here as when one finds it in real life: It's the diffidence of someone who is meek by disposition, but whose self-image is, at bottom, healthy and confident. Such people are interesting because they're rare, in that most people, if anything, tend to be the reverse, blustering on the outside and unsure on the inside.

"The Constant Gardener" is beautifully structured, an artful mix of forward motion and flashbacks. For the flashbacks, director Fernando Meirelles employs a handheld camera, but subtly, not ostentatiously, as if to suggest subliminally the shaky and fragile nature of memory. Justin and Tessa (Weisz) meet, and shortly thereafter, she's accompanying him to Africa. She's a care worker and an outspoken political activist, not the usual match for a diplomat. She is that appealing entity, the English wild woman whose direct, neurotic emotional energy is combined with a forceful and articulate intelligence.

We see Justin and Tessa as a young married couple: Their physical closeness, their delight in her pregnancy, the evening bath with the door left ajar. This is something movies rarely do well, Eros without mystery, the erotic in its cozy, married form. "The Constant Gardener" could easily end up being remembered as the movie that made audiences fall in love with Weisz, and she deserves that

for her free, bright and full-blooded performance. But we can't overlook Meirelles and screenwriter Jeffrey Caine for providing these loving contexts.

The filmmakers take pains to impress upon the audience the realness and happy functionality of this union because this becomes an important contrast to the evil of the political and business sphere. In Kenya, while treating the sick, Tessa stumbles upon something that doesn't seem quite right about the medicine being supplied by a major pharmaceutical company. She becomes a pit bull, asking questions and demanding answers, making a spectacle of herself when necessary and never letting up.

Fiennes and Weisz are supported by a pair of fine British character actors, the slippery Bill Nighy and the rough-hewn Pete Postlethwaite, and by a superb American actor, Danny Huston, who has not yet got his due. Huston is an expert at playing moral weakness, and his role here, as a family friend irresistibly drawn to Tessa, gives him plenty of opportunity to show his stuff.

Ultimately, Tess' journey obsession becomes Justin's obsession, and with that the movie broadens its canvas and becomes truly international, spanning from London to Africa, with a stop in Berlin for good measure. As a tale of intercontinental intrigue, the movie's mechanics are flawless. As an examination of the ways in which the First World routinely rapes the Third World, its point of view is persuasive. But underlying everything is that other thing, the romantic.

In a sense, "The Constant Gardener" depicts a search for two truths. The husband wants to uncover the shady symbiosis of the British government and the pharmaceutical giants, and he wants to better understand his wife and the dynamic of his marriage to her. The first search provides the action, but it's the personal search that makes it matter.

-- Advisory: This film contains nudity, sexual situations, strong language and violence.

http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/08/31/DDGG9EF6VH16.DTL

PFS Film Review
The Constant Gardener

The novels of John Le Carré have established a reputation as superb spy novels involving government agents. The film The Constant Gardener, directed by Fernando Meirelles, is based on another Le Carré novel, but the subject is espionage of industrial dirty secrets. The first fifteen minutes of the movie are somewhat puzzling, as they shift back and forth in time and place, seeking thereby to establish the premise that Justin Quayle (played by Ralph Fiennes) deeply loved his wife Tessa (played by Rachel Weisz) despite her many extramarital affairs.

They meet in London, after diplomat Quayle delivers a lecture on behalf of an absent colleague. Tessa rises in the audience to importune Quayle about Britain's involvement in the Iraq War as a betrayal of the principles of the United Nations. After the exchange, they make friends, end up in bed, and soon Tessa is begging Quayle to take her along on his next diplomatic posting in Kenya, whether as a mistress, wife, or whatever. They marry, she gets pregnant, and they leave for Kenya, where Tessa decides to volunteer as a health aide to a medical clinic. However, she pursues an agenda hidden from her husband: She believes that a pharmaceutical company is secretly conducting clinical trials for a new tuberculosis drug through a British aid agency that ostensibly dispenses drugs to UN-run clinics in order to combat the HIV virus, and she interacts with Internet interlocutors as well as officials in Kenya.

The scandal involves overcharging for the HIV drugs, agencies using aid money to line their pockets and to make profligate overhead expenses, a Faustian pact between a pharmaceutical giant and a distributor firm, using Kenyans as guinea pigs for a clinical trial of an unsafe TB drug, approval of the arrangement by the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Bernard Pellegrin (played by Bill Nighy), bribery of Kenyan and later Zimbabwean officials, overt racism about the expendability of African lives, and ultimately the intimidation and assassination of whistleblowers.

As one character opines, "Pharmaceuticals are right up there with arms dealers." Quayle, however, is oblivious of his wife's agenda and sex partners until she suddenly turns up dead under mysterious circumstances. Quite the fastidious gardener, Quayle calls upon his attention to detail in order to track down those who caused her death--and why. As he disturbs the sleeping dogs, including the balancing act of British Ambassador Sandy Woodrow (played by Danny Huston), he becomes a target himself and ultimately is killed, but not without leaking the documents to his deceased wife's brother, who exposes the plot, including the role of Pellegrin, who is being rewarded by a lucrative position with the pharmaceutical giant.

The plot calls attention to many human rights issues that seldom receive attention and treats filmviewers to a gratuitous Janjaweed-type raid; Kenya, after all, borders on the Sudan, though on the South, not the West. The cinematography of Kenya reveals not only natural beauty but also the squalor in which ordinary Kenyans live. Indeed, the two protagonist actors were reportedly so shocked by the slums and abject poverty of Kenya that they have set up a trust fund to provide assistance to the poor.

Despite the lack of any pretence to being a true story, Le Carré clearly is aware of how pharmaceutical giant Pfizer not long ago

administered an unsafe antibiotic in Nigeria to combat bacterial meningitis in order to obtain licensing for the drug after a ban in the West because of damage to the joints that potentially causes arthritis; the number of deaths and extent of side effects from Pfizer's tests is still secret. As the film's tagline says, "The conspiracy is global." Accordingly, the Political Film Society has nominated The Constant Gardener as best film on human rights of 2005. MH
