

The physician at the movies

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Kenneth Branagh (center) is Viktor Cherevin in *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit*.

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Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit

Starring Chris Pine, Keira Knightley, Kevin Costner, and Kenneth Branagh.

Directed by Kenneth Branagh. Rated PG-13. Running time 105 minutes.

The film opens in London on September 11, 2001, where John Patrick Ryan (Chris Pine) is pursuing an economics degree. The 9/11 attack leads him to join the Marines. Cut next to Afghanistan where he and other Marines are being transported in a helicopter while discussing the relative merits of the Baltimore Ravens and Cincinnati Bengals. (This dialogue was probably an homage to Tom Clancy, a Baltimorean and the author of the Jack Ryan novels.) This is the only Ryan story that was not based on a novel; it is a prequel to the series created by Adam Cozad and David Koepp with the blessing of Clancy, who died on October 2, 2013, after production was completed.



The helicopter is shot down and Ryan sustains serious injuries. He is sent to Walter Reed Hospital where he meets and falls in love with Cathy Muller (Keira Knightley), a medical student rotating through physical

therapy. She can't date patients but when she is no longer his caregiver and has embarked on her ophthalmology residency, they begin a relationship. After he leaves the hospital, Ryan is recruited by CIA operative Thomas Harper (Kevin Costner) as an analyst to monitor the Russians who are plotting to destroy the dollar. We are treated to screensful of computer-generated figures and assorted mumbo-jumbo that essentially show that the Russians are hiding numerous accounts and could dump billions in treasury bonds on the market at a critical time, to devastating effect. Ryan is sent to Moscow, where he escapes killers, helps advise the tracking down of terrorists, all the while racing against the clock to prevent a stock market collapse. He is almost killed by the person who is sent to meet him at the airport to "protect" him. This is the first of three all-out battles to save his life.

The movie becomes more interesting when he meets Russian oligarch Victor Cherevin (Kenneth Branagh), the Soviet mastermind of the two-pronged attack on the United States that is code-named "Lamentations." This is an allusion to the Russian Orthodox religion that was suppressed by the Communists but is now flourishing. Cherevin's plan is aimed at extracting revenge as a retribution for the loss of his son when the United States backed the mujahedin against Russia

in Afghanistan. His first prong involves the activation of his other son Constantin (Lenn Kudrjawski)—who has lived in Dearborn, Michigan as a mole for years—to carry out a terrorist attack on Wall Street. The location made me wonder if this was originally scripted to involve Muslims and, sure enough, it was set originally in Dubai. One wonders what pressure was exerted to get this changed. The second prong is the cashing in of the billions of bonds timed to coincide with blowing up Wall Street. All this is accomplished by Ryan in what has to be an exhausting forty-eight hours with his bad back and gimpy legs. There are the requisite and hair-raising lunatic car chases in Moscow and Lower Manhattan. Totally far-fetched.

Add the cheesy low-budget sets—for example, shots of Saint Basil’s having been filmed in England (I assume the Russians nixed location shots)—and you get a not-very-good picture and one that I would usually tell people to avoid. Yet it’s strangely entertaining. It fits the category of pictures that are so exquisitely bad that they are good. What makes it so is the likeability of the cast, especially Branagh whom Muller diagnoses with jaundice and who has only a few months to live, a life expectancy that is likely to be shortened by his colossal bungling. Kevin Costner is excellent as Ryan’s CIA handler, who acts as a calming influence as Ryan races around Moscow and the United States. Knightley is perfect as Ryan’s fiancée who, because they are not married, cannot be told that he is working for the CIA. When she learns that he is she says, “Thank God.” She thought all his absences were because he was cheating on her. She is invited by Cherevin, who has a soft spot for women, alcohol, and heroin, to come to Moscow and she plays a major role in identifying and tracking the terrorists. The best line is at the end when Ryan and Harper are to meet the president and Harper tells Ryan to “Wipe that Boy Scout on a field trip look off your face.” It’s exactly the persona that’s made Pine unpopular with Ryan aficionados. I kind of liked it.

There were some interesting touches, such as the Snellen chart throw pillow on Muller’s sofa. I also resonated with Ryan meeting his handler at the Film Forum near Lincoln Center during the playing of *Sorry Wrong Number*, starring the much underrated Barbara Stanwyck, who never won an Academy Award despite numerous outstanding performances. She plays a bedridden hypochondriac who overhears a telephone conversation involving a murder plan and gradually realizes she is the intended victim. This scared the life out of me when I was eleven and swore me off scary movies.

There is also an excellent dinner scene where the wine is an Haut Brion, reminding me of having visited that vineyard with my wife Colette on our honeymoon in 1966. The owner offered to sell us a case of what he said was an excellent vintage but I demurred. Being unschooled in wine (a deficit that persists), we probably would have never held on to it.

Finally, as if to confirm that this is a Geezer movie, the film received the inaugural AARP Movies for Grownups seal intended to recognize films that have a special appeal to age 50+ audience members.¹ What more can I say!

Reference

1. AARP Debuts “Movies for Grownups” Seal. <http://www.aarp.org/about-aarp/press-center/info-01-2014/aarpdebuts-movies-for-grownups-seal.html>.

The Grand Budapest Hotel

Starring Ralph Fiennes, Tom Wilkinson, F. Murray Abraham, and Tony Revolori.

Directed by Wes Anderson. Rated R. Running time 100 minutes.

If I can convince even one reader to skip this movie and to put the time to better use, I will have accomplished my objective. If I hadn’t gone to the screening with two guests I would’ve walked out. I haven’t sat through so terrible a film as



Paul Schläse, Tony Revolori, Tilda Swinton, and Ralph Fiennes in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. ©Fox Searchlight Pictures

this since *Last Year at Marienbad* with its long, long couloirs (corridors). Like *Marienbad*, this film will appeal to intellectual cinephiles, not middlebrows like me. It is a succession of visuals with a weird story line, if it can be called that. It also has the added attribute of appealing to those who like to spot the stars playing mostly cameo roles: see Bill Murray, see Edward Norton, see Adrien Brody, see F. Murray Abraham, see Jude Law, see Owen Wilson, see Tom Wilkinson, see Ralph Fiennes. That doesn't include two of my least favorite actors who play menacing roles: Harvey Keitel (with a New York accent), and Willem Dafoe (although, I did like Dafoe in *Mr. Bean's Holiday* where he plays a caricature of himself).

Its other appeal involves what I call "doing the Tarantino" (the ex-video store clerk turned director). The game involves recognizing visuals that pay tribute to other films like *The Seventh Seal*, *Night Train to Munich*, *The Lady Vanishes*, etc. Some people in the audience of the pre-release screening laughed at the inside jokes before the punch line.

To call the film "quirky" understates the grotesqueries with the lopped-off heads in a basket and fingers broken off by the closing of an elevator. A better description is pretentious and confusing, as the director skips around from one place to another. Give Ralph Fiennes credit for trying to connect the dots and hold the film together as the central character M. Gustave, "the finest hotel concierge known to humankind," presiding over a Middle European hotel between the wars. Wes Anderson is considered an auteur director, which allows him to film his personal hallucinations whether the audience understands them or not. David Denby, critic for the *New Yorker*, characterized the movie thus: "the past becomes visible in stages, as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope that gets repeatedly extended." He concluded his review by saying that the film is "no more than mildly funny," producing "murmuring titters rather than laughter—the sound of viewers affirming their own acumen in so reliably getting the joke."¹

To be fair I should note that some people liked this film. Michael Phillips, critic for the *Chicago Tribune* called it "one of Anderson's cleverest and most gorgeous movies, dipping just enough of a toe in the real world—and in the melancholy works of its acknowledged inspiration, the late Austrian writer Stefan Zweig—to prevent the whole thing from floating off into the ether of minor whimsy. It's a confection with bite. . . . Even when the dialogue slips into jokey anachronisms or less than sparkling repartee."² Talk about pretentiousness!

Joe Morgenstern of the *Wall Street Journal* said, "Hardly a moment goes by in Wes Anderson's 'The Grand Budapest Hotel' when there isn't something to make us smile—a pretty image, a funny line, a droll sight gag, a charming set, a striking juxtaposition of color or tone. . . . Cosmopolitan, self-ironic and sexually ambiguous, just as Zweig was, Gustave is a picaresque hero, but he is also a fierce survivor who speaks more than once of 'this barbaric slaughterhouse that was once

known as humanity.'"³ All I can say about that is "Wow!"

Let's give John Podhoretz, the *Weekly Standard's* movie critic the last word: Comparing Anderson to Bertolt Brecht, he said, "I loathe Brecht, but at least he was up to *something*. What the hell is *The Grand Budapest Hotel* about? Beats me."⁴

References

1. Denby D. Lost time. *New Yorker* 2014 Mar 10: 78-79.
2. Phillips M. Precisely Wes Anderson. *Baltimore Sun* 2014 Mar 21: 16.
3. Morgenstern J. Multistoried "Hotel": Wicked, wild Wes. *Wall Street J* 2014 Mar 7: D3.
4. Podhoretz J. Just checking in. *Weekly Standard* 2014 Mar 31/Apr 7: 47.

Grand Hotel

Starring Greta Garbo, John Barrymore, Joan Crawford, Wallace Beery, and Lionel Barrymore.

Directed by Edmund Goulding. Not rated. B&W. Running time 115 minutes.

Seeing *The Grand Budapest Hotel* made me want to check out the 1932 classic, *Grand Hotel*, a showcase of the luminaries in the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio, which trumpeted that it had "more stars than there are in the heavens." The film is based on Vicki Baum's novel of the same name, drawn from her work as a chambermaid at two hotels in Berlin between the wars. The film's premise is that "nothing ever happens at the Grand Hotel. People come and people go but nothing ever happens." Actually, many things happen behind the scenes at the sprawling hotel—including murder.

It opens with the old-fashioned switchboard operators expertly handling calls coming in and going out of the most expensive hotel in Berlin. Would-be guests congregate at the front desk vying for a room; this includes Lionel Barrymore as a worker in the factory of another hotel guest, a brutish industrial magnate played by Wallace Beery. Barrymore* has only a few months to live and decides to use his savings on a fling. Beery is a loudmouth Prussian who is trying to engineer a deal under false pretenses to avoid financial ruin. Greta Garbo plays an aging Russian ballerina who no longer draws an adoring crowd. The twenty-seven-year-old Garbo signals her despair both in the film and probably in her personal life in her opening line: "I've never been so tired in my life." She shoos away her hangers-on uttering her signature line that will later become a favorite of mimics, "I want to be alone."

*For all except John Barrymore who plays the Duke I will use the name of the star since the film is really about them and not the characters they play. Indeed the tales of their interactions during the making of the film are legendary.



Greta Garbo in *Grand Hotel*. ©MGM

A world-weary fifty-year-old John Barrymore plays a Duke who has turned jewel thief to pay off his gambling debts. He intends to steal the ballerina's pearls, which ironically mean nothing to her anymore because her career seems to be over. Joan Crawford plays a stenographer hired by Beery in one of the sexiest roles she ever played. There's a great scene with her and the Duke, who when he learns she's a stenographer asks her if she wouldn't mind taking dictation from him. The scene would have been cut a few years later, but the film was made in what is called the pre-code era between the time when the Motion Picture Production Code was enacted and its strict enforcement in 1933. Crawford was clearly trying to upstage Garbo and did so to such effect that Garbo complained to Irving Thalberg, MGM's so-called boy genius who was responsible for the film being made. Thalberg arranged to shoot some extra scenes of Garbo to give her more screen time, including a love scene with the Duke who gains entry to her apartment but changes his mind about wanting to steal her pearls when he sees the vulnerability of the despairing ballerina on the verge of suicide. He makes love to her, speaking such deathless lines as, "I want to be with you; I want to breathe the air that you breathe." His love energizes Garbo as he tells her, "You must believe that I love you. I've never loved anyone like you."

The film, which cost eighty million in today's dollars, made substantially more than that. It won the Academy Award as the Best Picture of 1932, but is the only Best Picture that had no other awards. How could it have, being replete with a bevy of actors with large egos jockeying for supremacy and who made their mark emoting in silent movies. The worst is Wallace Beery. Pauline Kael said it best: "Anyone who goes to see this movie expecting an intelligent script or even 'good acting,' should

have his head examined. Most of the players give impossibly bad performances. They chew up the camera. But if you want to see what screen glamour used to be and what, originally, 'stars' were, this is perhaps the best example of all time."¹

If you want to see an entertaining film about hotels, I recommend *Weekend at the Waldorf* a 1945 remake of *Grand Hotel*. It stars Ginger Rogers, Walter Pidgeon, Lana Turner, Van Johnson, Edward Arnold, and humorist Robert Benchley, who opens the movie as a concierge walking a dog and inviting us into the hotel. I have a fondness for the picture, which also features Xavier Cugat, who with his pre-Charo singer Lina Romay and his orchestra, was regularly in residence at the hotel. The hotel retains most of the elegance it had when our high school senior prom was held in its Starlight Roof in 1953. There's a wonderful clock in the middle of the foyer and the piano that Cole Porter played when he lived there. New York in 1945 is best captured in the excellent book *Manhattan '45*.²

Reference

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2. Morris J. Manhattan '45. Baltimore (MD): Johns Hopkins University Press; 1998.

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John Barrymore and Joan Crawford in *Grand Hotel*. ©MGM