



Starring: Nicole Kidman, Sean Penn, Catherine Keener

8 out of 10

Director Sydney Pollack's polished *The Interpreter* is a welcome return to form, or, perhaps it's actually a return to an old form.

Though entirely up-to-date, there is a 1975 *Three Days of the Condor*-vibe to the film (maybe not too much of a coincidence, Pollack made that too); one could easily imagine the cinnamon-maned Robert Redford in the lead male role with the feisty/sultry Ali McGraw as the titular character.

Since it is 2005 Sean Penn gets the former role. He's Tobin Keller, a federal agent investigating the reports of a comely U.N. interpreter, Silvia Broome, played by Nicole Kidman (though he's probably moved past it decades ago one can imagine Redford calling up his old collaborator Pollack and saying, "So, I hear there might be a part for me in the new film you're working on..").

Tobin is put on Silvia's case after she claims to have overheard a plot to assassinate a despot, Edmond Zuwanie, the leader of an African nation in turmoil (I think the name of it was Modobo, we'll go with that). Edmond Zuwanie was once a freedom fighter but, after he took power he became a brutal dictator. He's planning to visit the U.N. in three-day's time to explain his recent controversial actions and he's a sure target of his enemies. As Tobin investigates he discovers that Silvia was born and raised in Modobo and may not be telling him the truth. Her past includes the painful loss of her parents and sister to a landmine and a stint as a revolutionary supporter.

Tobin has had a painful loss in his recent past as well, which has driven him to the bottle. His partner (Catherine Keener, thrown away here, but they did give her one or two great lines) is worried about him as is his boss (Sydney Pollack, uncredited) but Tobin is dogged in discovering what Broome is hiding.

The both get to engage in some fast and intelligent repartee, courtesy of a screenplay that had Steve Zaillian touch it up. "To be totally honest with you, I don't know how totally honest I can be with you," says Silvia during an initial interrogation. The way these two talk to each other never ceases to interest us.

Much like Klute we may not believe that their relationship can last, or even essentially, truthfully start, but we like to see them together and to hear their conversations.

What's surprising is, that as far as action, very little actually occurs. The structure of the narrative is based upon sleuthing, yes, but it's centered on the combative relationship these two start with, that turns into a common sense of loss, and then, just maybe, into something tender.

The movie has a lustrous, big-screen look, as Kidman walks around with her hair carelessly hanging over one eye, like a modern day Vanessa Redgrave in her glory days. Penn is the classic grizzled and bitter P.I., you can almost see the screenplay's description of him, "TOBIN, GRIZZLED, WORLD-WEARY, KNOCKS BACK A SHOT"

There are some out there (myself included) who will have to come to grips with the fact that Jeff Spicoli now fits the grizzled, hard-drinking Eastwood/Reynolds/Newman role, but he does, and he does so admirably.

Some are curious about the political stance of *The Interpreter*, what with Penn, and the U.N. and all being featured in one film. And yes, there is a distinct political stance, but it's not overt nor overbearing. Much as the over-looked *The Manchurian Candidate* made its points in oblique ways, so does *The Interpreter*. It makes them well because Pollack's film makes all of its points well., the trait of a solid craftsman working on solid material.

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