



OSS-117: cAIRO, nEST OF SPIES

Autumn
Season
2008

Release: 2006, **Country:** France, **Cert (UK):** 12A, **Runtime:** 99 mins **Director:** Michel Hazanavicius
Cast: Aure Atika, Berenice Bejo, Constantin Alexandrov, Jean Dujardin, Philippe Lefebvre, Said Amadis

Reviewed by Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*:

Perhaps I shouldn't have laughed as much I did, but this French spy spoof by Michel Hazanavicius punches out cheeky gags and incorrect humour with the gusto of Zucker/Abrahams or Mike Myers in his Austin Powers heyday. There's a far higher comedy-factor than the dull *Get Smart*, and it's incidentally the



most lovingly detailed period pastiche since Todd Haynes's *Far from Heaven*. In a week of overblown, unappetising or disappointing films, this makes a refreshing change. And how interesting to be offered a French movie that doesn't come straight from the "arthouse" stable.

It is an affectionate send up of a pulp-fiction character known as the "French Bond": Agent OSS-117, Hubert Bonisseur de la Bath, star of innumerable, deadly serious postwar thrillers by prolific author Jean Bruce. (The character actually predates Ian Fleming's creation, though I confess that, before this, I had never heard of him.) It superbly recreates a 50s/60s look, and Jean Dujardin plays the supercool hero as a smug, preposterous type with Clouseauesque pretensions. He is a French chauvinist-patriot with a ridiculous hero-worship of his nation's uninspired statesman, President René Coty, given to handing out photographs of Coty as ill-advised gifts to the inhabitants of France's seething colonies. It is a little like a 1990s MI6 man having a crush on John Major.

With his sculpted, receding hair and light tailored suits, Dujardin resembles the young Connery in *From Russia With Love*. The year is 1955, and OSS-117 has been sent to Cairo to monitor the growing Suez crisis, make contact with a beautiful agent Larmina, played by Bérénice Bejo, and generally promote French power, a mission he accepts with glassy-eyed fervour. His superiors see him as a "specialist in the Arabo-Muslim world", an assessment that turns out to be horrifically wrong, when OSS-117 smirkingly informs the natives that Islam is a foolish religion: "You'll grow tired of it - it won't last long." OSS-117's fantastically crass views of the Arab and Muslim world - though probably not too far from the real opinions of the 1950s colonial power - cause him to be regularly ridiculed and beaten up, but somehow his essential self-belief never falters.

Out in Cairo, our hero enjoys many romantic conquests: one is the cue for an excellent sight gag in which the camera pans coyly away from the embracing couple on the hotel bed to some roses in a vase, only to catch a tactless view of them in the mirror.

This is the kind of "stupid" comedy that can only be pulled off by very smart comics. *OSS-117* has been such a box-office hit in France that, like Peter Sellers, Jean Dujardin may well be tied to this single role in a string of decreasingly funny films. Never mind. This one delivers unpretentious comedy, with suprisingly chancey satire. The production design and sets by Maamar Ech-Cheikh and Sonia Kalaydjian are great, and the closing credits, incidentally, are presented in a curtain-call style, reminiscent of British TV sitcom geniuses Jimmy Perry and David Croft.