Dalton’s fine performance can’t salvage poor Bond plot

THE LIVING DAYLIGHTS
Directed by John Glen.
Starring Timothy Dalton and Maryam d’Abo.

By JOSEPH L. SHIPMAN

Bond is back, and it’s about time. After far too many weakly rehashed, perennial Bond film producers Cubby Broccoli has made a fresh start with Timothy Dalton as the new 007. Dalton, who was actually considered to replace Sean Connery at the tender age of 28 before Roger Moore got the nod, makes a promising start in the latest chapter in the James Bond saga, “The Living Daylights.”

Although practically anyone would be an improvement on Moore, Dalton gives us a Bond who is not only rejuvenated but intriguing and different. He is the handsomest 007 yet, without Connery’s effortless sex appeal but with a darker magnetism of his own. This Bond has lived through a lot and learned a lot; he is reflective, even cynical, without having lost any of his force or drive. Dalton’s achievement in projecting this is all the more impressive because of the inferior script he had to work with.

With the exception of gadgetmaster Q, who is showing his age, the rest of the cast is new. M is gruffer and Moneypenny who is showing his age, the rest of the cast had to work with.

The producers have gotten halfway out of the rut by getting good, new writers as well, the actors do a good job with what they have, but the dialogue gets them nowhere. Bond, who hasn’t figured this out yet but smells a rat, goes to Czechoslovakia to help Kara defect to Austria. She was Koskov’s girlfriend, helping him stage the defection so it would appear real to the British, and is being questioned by a suspicious KGB.

After some adventures and a very funny scene at the border, Bond and Kara go to Tangier for some sort of international arms trade show. Bond has orders to kill the KGB head Pushkin and stifle SMERSH, but since he doesn’t believe Koskov’s story, he gets together with Pushkin and launches his own plan.

At this point the plot gets out of control. It would be hopeless to summarize further, because it is impossible to render consistent. The action moves to a Soviet military base in Afghanistan, to a mujahideen rebel camp, to an airplane over Pakistan, and back to Tangier, getting more complicated and more impossible every minute. Throughout the remainder of the film the characters all behave like idiots, and the plot leaves many gaping holes.

It is true that the plots of the Bond movies are supposed to be preposterous, with the emphasis supposedly on the acting and the gadgetry. But the cardinal rule is that although the plot may be implausible, it must not be impossible. If you have to keep asking “now why did he (she, they) do that (stupid thing)” rather than “why did he (she, they) do that (stupid thing)” every 90 seconds or so, it became impossible to keep your disbelief suspended.

The actors do a good job with what they have, but the dialogue gets them when the plot does not. The inevitable romance between Bond and Kara is horribly scripted but at least the chemistry is there. Dalton is by far the best actor in the bunch; his Bond has a lot of potential.

The producers have gotten halfway out of their rut by getting good, new talent. If they wake up and get good, new writers as well, the series can be better than ever.

Timothy Dalton and Maryam d’Abo in “The Living Daylights.”

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