THE ARTS

Tantalizing plot makes The Pelican Brief shine

THE PELICAN BRIEF
Starring Julia Roberts and Denzel Washington.
Directed by Alan J. Pakula.

By Patrick Mahoney
Staff Writer

Julia Roberts and Denzel Washington star in The Pelican Brief, a Warner Brothers film based on the novel by John Grisham (The Firm), in which two supreme court justices have been killed, and there seem to be no clues to unmask the murderer.

Darby Shaw, a law student and an admirer of one of the murdered justices, decides to solve the case. She spends weeks doing research and comes up with a suspect and his possible motives. This brief stirs up a lot of concern in the upper echelons of the government, with waves of anxiety washing as high as the White House.

Shaw soon realizes that everyone she shows the brief to seems to end up dead. When she finds herself being followed, she panics and runs. Not knowing whom to trust, she turns to Gray Grantham (Denzel Washington), a reporter for The Washington Herald.

The plot is well-crafted, leaving a trail of clues for the audience to follow, but withholding the juiciest details until the end. And as a surprising twist, the suspense in this movie is not tied up in the identity of Shaw’s and Grantham’s pursuers, but in the contents of the mysterious document known only as the Pelican Brief. The murderer is revealed early on, and it is the cleverness of motive and depth of intrigue that keeps the story exciting.

Roberts’ performance is nearly perfect. She plays the paranoid student believably; she was just as nervous about meeting the good guys as she was meeting the bad guys. At no point does she have the mysterious intuition that the person she is walking off with is about to try to kill her. The audience gets the impression that she is simply a very bright student who stumbled across something she shouldn’t have.

Washington also does a fine job as a reporter for The Washington Herald. We see from the start that he is a discriminating reporter, when he takes out a phone booth to get a picture of an anonymous source. At first he treats Shaw as just another story, and it is only after they work together that he develops any sort of relationship with her.

With a beautiful heroine, and a handsome man to save her from peril, it might seem that this is just another film following a formula. But Grisham’s genius for tantalizing plot development lifts the movie out of the melodrama middle. The Pelican Brief/strills in refreshing style.

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