The Good German

Talent: Cate Blanchett, George Clooney, Tobey Maguire, Tony Curran, Ravil Isaynov, Beau Bridges, Robin Weigert.

Date of review: Thursday the 15th of March, 2007

Director: Steven Soderbergh
Duration: 105 minutes
Classification: MA (15+)
We rate it: 3½ stars.

Director Steven Soderbergh’s homage to wartime European cinema and to American film noir is a fascinating, challenging studio picture. As much a loving series of references to the great studio productions of the 1940s (Casablanca in particular) as it is a modern romantic thriller, The Good German functions on numerous levels at once, and in the capable hands of Soderbergh and his effortlessly charming actors, it’s quite wonderful to behold.

The Good German’s premise is simple: it’s late 1945 Berlin, and as Europe and the world prepares for the Potsdam Peace Convention, all manner of profiteers and war-refugees are trying to make the best of things amid the post-conflict rubble. Much of Europe at this time is lawless and devastated, and the disheveled population is scratching together a living, or just a means by which to subsist. Into this post-war milieu come our protagonists, American journalist Jake Geismer (Clooney), his reluctant assistant Tully (a slimy Tobey Maguire) and his once-lover, the enigmatic German woman Lena Brandt (Blanchett). As the paths of these characters cross, old loves and old betrayals, and new desires and complicated schemes and ruses, will cross and clash and eventually leave no-one unscathed. If this all sounds a little bit melodramatic and writ-large, it certainly is; Soderbergh has quite deliberately invoked the heightened style and narrative strategies of the great melodramatic studio romances of the 1940s, and has directed his actors to deliver their performances at just that slightly exaggerated pitch.

The references to the cinema of sixty years ago are not simply through characters and performances however; on a technical level also the film is a complex re-enactment of 1940s filmmaking. Photographing the film himself (as he often does under the pseudonym Peter Andrews), Soderbergh has used
the wide-shot compositional style of studio production, and has employed period visual techniques like matting and rear-projection in order to give the visuals their characteristic look and feel. Furthermore, though the film was shot on colour filmstock, the colour information was drained out during the post-production process, and we are left with the gauzy, glowing black-and-white that evokes instantaneous nostalgia. In a visual sense, The Good German is a fascinating trip.

Soderbergh is, for my money, one of America’s most intelligent and multi-talented filmmakers. Hopping and skipping from one genre and style to the next, he is restless and inventive, and here his careful inhabitation of a different period’s cinematic style is as referential of our modern historical context as it is evocative of the past. With Clooney and Blanchett oozing the kind of luminous screen presence that their fore-parents Cary Grant and Marlene Dietrich possessed, the project is capped off brilliantly, and marries its intoxicating style with serious acting credibility. Challenging and interesting, if ultimately possessed of perhaps just a little bit more style than substance, The Good German is both like and unlike anything else you might have seen this year.

Nick Prescott