The Bourne Ultimatum

Talent: Matt Damon, Joan Allen, David Strathairn, Julia Stiles, Paddy Considine, Albert Finney, Scott Glenn.

Date of review: Thursday 16th August, 2007

Writer/director/editor: Paul Greengrass
Classification: M
Duration: 114 minutes
We rate it: Four and a half stars.

2007 has certainly been the year of Hollywood “threequels”. Spider-Man 3, Ocean’s Thirteen, Shrek the Third and Pirates of the Caribbean 3 have all seen release this year, and now we await the third instalment of the hugely successful Bourne series, which will hit our screens at the end of this month. The Bourne Ultimatum (which follows The Bourne Identity and The Bourne Supremacy) is currently smashing its way through almost everything else at the US box-office, and will no doubt make a significant impact when it opens here.

The first of the Bourne films, which was directed by independent American filmmaker Doug Liman, slammed its way onto screens in 2002. It showed Matt Damon developing as an actor by taking on a heroic tough-guy role and making of it something quite subversive. At the time Damon was still better known as an actor most interested in small-scale independent projects, and who paid the bills, as it were, by working with the likes of Coppola and Spielberg. The Bourne Identity emerged as a notable success, and both Damon’s convincing and complex performance and Liman’s left-of-centre filmmaking approach brought elements of grittiness and believability to what could otherwise have been a by-the-numbers action yarn.

The premise, taken from Robert Ludlum’s trilogy of up-market airport novels, was that an ex-US government assassin, Jason Bourne, had gone “off the reservation”, abandoning his gun-for-hire assignments and focussing instead on understanding his own disturbing past. The first film opens with a badly wounded Bourne being fished out of the Atlantic ocean, barely alive and suffering total amnesia. Revived and cared for by a group of fishermen, Bourne realises that he has a complex and highly secret past, and that he will have to reconcile himself with it before he can leave the world of espionage behind him. The action and intrigue begin immediately, with the CIA superiors in Black-Ops turning on their rogue agent and sending the troops after him to bring him down.
By the time The Bourne Supremacy hit our screens in 2004, the franchise had moved up another notch, and was in the hands of British director Paul Greengrass, who brought his gritty, nerve-jangling visual approach to mainstream audiences, and turned the second film into an unrelentingly exciting action-espionage tale. Damon had grown as an actor, too, and was able to present the darker and more ambiguous elements of his character’s personality with quite some power. Greengrass has stayed on to direct The Bourne Ultimatum, and while it’s not quite as impressive as number two, it’s still a crackerjack action film and a thought-provoking examination of the shady world of counter-espionage.

The film opens breathlessly, thrusting the audience into a scene that we soon realise takes us back to the time-line of the second movie. By filling in a substantial amount of action that had occurred off-screen in The Bourne Supremacy, Greengrass connects us straight back into the story, and shows us the Bourne character in the midst of a desperate fight to out-maneuvre his CIA enemies. What follows will skip from continent to continent, and will combine genuinely chilling depictions of the behind-the-scenes machinations and betrayals within the Intelligence agencies with adrenaline-drenched action scenes.

Greengrass and Damon work brilliantly together. Damon is an intelligent, charismatic and capable actor, and his comments in interviews suggested to all of us who spoke with him on his recent trip to Australia that his intelligence extends well beyond mere performance. He convincingly described the challenging and provocative subtexts contained in The Bourne Ultimatum; I’ll leave the particulars of these elements to viewers to discover for themselves. I’m an unashamed fan of this enjoyable and intelligent thriller series. Exciting, suspenseful, and offering interesting political commentary for those willing to look for it, The Bourne Ultimatum is the thinking person’s action-espionage flick.

Nick Prescott