

MARYLIN REXROTH (CATHERINE ZETA-JONES) AND MILES MASSEY (GEORGE CLOONEY)
ENGAGED WITH THE ENEMY.



MELINDA SUE GORDON. UNIVERSAL PICTURES. 2003.

Engage the Enemy

Liars and lovers

INTOLERABLE CRUELTY: Directed by Joel Coen. Written by Robert Ramsey, Matthew Stone, Ethan Coen and Joel Coen. Story by Ramsey, Stone and John Romano. Produced by Ethan Coen, Brian Grazer. Executive producers, James Jacks, Sean Daniel. Cinematographer, Roger Deakins. Production design, Leslie McDonald. Editor, Roderick Jaynes. Costumes, Mary Zophres. Music, Carter Burwell. Starring George Clooney and Catherine Zeta Jones. With Geoffrey Rush, Cedric the Entertainer, Edward Herrmann, Richard Jenkins and Billy Bob Thornton. Universal Pictures, 2003. PG-13. 100 minutes.

Romantic Hollywood screwball comedies from the 1930s is the latest film genre to interest the irrepressible Coen brothers, Joel and Ethan. They tweaked the script for *Intolerable Cruelty*, and their prints are all over the evidence — double entendre, double takes, sharp-edged witticisms, unbridled greed, eccentric supporting characters and self-absorbed leading characters.

The film's a contemporary tale set among the upper registers of Beverly Hills and Los Angeles society — the wealthy, ruthless, competitive divorce lawyer, Miles Massey (George Clooney), and the scheming, gold-digger divorcee, Marilyn Rexroth (Catherine Zeta-Jones). Miles is quite taken with himself, even has a challenge-proof prenuptial agreement named after him, but Marilyn is the smooth, elegant queen of seduction and deception.

The film opens as TV show producer Donovan Donaly (Geoffrey Rush) drives through traffic snarls, singing along with his music, going home early on a beautiful day. But Donovan finds a strange van parked in his driveway and his wife, Bonnie (Stacey Travis) between the sheets with the swimming pool cleaner (Jack Kyle). Donaly is the aggrieved partner, but Bonnie hires Massey, and she gets everything.

Massey may be ethically challenged, but he knows he's met his match when he takes the case of serial adulterer Rex Rexroth (Edward Herrmann) and lays eyes on his wife, Marilyn, for the first time. Massey cannot pass a mirror without looking lovingly at himself and checking his white, white teeth and brilliant smile. But Marilyn is so composed, so cool and self-assured that she doesn't even notice the looks she attracts as she walks into

Massey's office with her lawyer, Freddy Bender (Richard Jenkins).

Once again, Massey wins the case at all costs, in part because of the testimony of an ostentatiously gay, European concierge, Heinz, the Baron Krauss von Espy (Jonathan Hadary), who knew the beautiful Marilyn before she married Rexroth. Another ace comic performance comes from private investigator Gus Petch (Cedric the Entertainer), whose professional impairment equals Massey's and is much funnier. Petch is as crass as Massey is a dandy.

Massey and Marilyn have many more moves before their dance is done, and I would not spoil the enticing twists and spins the Coens have in mind for you. Between these two, falsity has no place, but avarice is assumed. Miles' motto is "Struggle, challenge and the ultimate destruction of your opponent — that's life." He admires Marilyn because she's good, a real pro. She admires Miles for his frankness and because he admires her. Both get to play their games with her next suitor, Howard D. Doyle (Billy Bob Thornton), a rich, grinning Texan who hasn't got a lick of good sense.

Clooney gives Massey the class, the élan that eluded the last Coen protagonist he played, Ulysses Everett McGill in *O Brother Where Art Thou?* But like McGill, who was also narcissist, Massey becomes a blithering fool when he falls for Marilyn. He doesn't care about money, about winning, about destroying his opponents anymore. He's not himself.

Massey delivers the message of love to his fellow jaded lawyers at the National Association of Matrimonial Attorneys, Nationwide (NOMAN), and instead of being booed offstage, he is congratulated, given a standing ovation. Some weep. This is when you know for sure you're in a Coen brothers film.

Now playing at Cinema World and Cinemark, *Intolerable Cruelty* is surprisingly sophisticated, quietly hilarious and genuinely subtle. Highest recommendations.

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