



Mathilde (Audrey Tautou), always searching for her new lover.

WARNER INDEPENDENT FILMS, 2004.

Tragic, Absurd War

Searching for the missing

A VERY LONG ENGAGEMENT: Written and directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, based on the novel by Sébastien Japrisot. Co-written by Guillaume Laurant. Produced by Francis Boespflug. Executive producer, Jean-Lou Monthieux. Cinematography, Bruno Delbonnel. Editor, Herve Schneid. Production design, Aline Bonetto. Composer, Angelo Badalamenti. Digital effects, Alain Carsoux. Sound, sound design, Laurent Kossayan. Costume design, Madeline Fontaine. Starring Audrey Tautou. With Gaspard Ulliel, Jean-Pierre Becker, Jodie Foster, Albert Depontel, Clovis Cornillac and Marion Cotillard. Warner Independent Pictures, 2004. R. 133 minutes.

Of all the wars of the 20th century, World War I is the most difficult for many Americans (including movie reviewers) to wrap their minds around. America entered the war late, but Europeans (as well Australian, Canadian and colonial troops) fought a brutal war of attrition in trenches across the world from 1914-1918. With autocratic power held by officers who did not fight, the generals' war used soldiers as pawns. Fought from the air as well as on the ground and with weaponry considered modern, the battlefields were simple killing grounds, where 10 million died.

Jean-Pierre Jeunet's latest film, *A Very Long Engagement*, opens onto disturbing war images: a disembodied head and partial trunk hanging from a broken cross in a veritable no-man's land; the ravaged earth upended and strewn with bodies; barbed-wire holding up the dead; tall-sided, mud-gray trenches filled with corpses. It's a wonder anyone got out alive.

The mystery of that slender hope infuses the story Jeunet tells, of a young woman left behind by her lover. Mathilde (Audrey Tautou) and Manech (Gaspard Ulliel) were childhood sweethearts before the war, as we see in romantic flashbacks, which could be hand-tinted postcards of the era.

When the war is over, Mathilde continues to play magical games with herself to ensure Manech will return alive. But Manech doesn't come back. After three years, he is declared dead. Mathilde's Aunt Benedicte (Chantal Neuwirth) and Uncle Sylvain (Dominique Pinon) urge the 20-year-old woman to get on with her life, but she silently, stubbornly holds to her belief that she would know if Manech were dead, so he must be alive.

Jeunet unspools the mystery of Manech's life or death in chapter-like sequences, interlacing a mix of scenes from 1920 Paris and the French countryside with flashbacks to horrific battlefields. The incongruity between peacetime France and the country besieged by war is jarring. Worst is a long sequence, in which five soldiers condemned for self-mutilation walk to their fates through a claustrophobic trench hell

called Bingo Crépuscule, in the Somme. The sepia-toned fields of grain, so beautifully wind-blown as the farmer Benoit Notre Dame (Clovis Cornillac) is conscripted for war, vividly contrast with the tortured mud and death-drenched trenches. These haunted places sound the dark note, which anchors Mathilde's deter-

mined search and keeps her quest free of whimsy and sentiment.

But Jeunet (*Amélie*, *City of Children*) has not forsaken his masterful flair for fantasy here. He fills the film with colorful minor characters, who relate to the central mystery in a meaningful way. Mathilde hires a detective named Germain Pire (Ticky Holgado) to locate the wives or friends of the four men court-martialed with Manech. "The Peerless Pry," a dandy who's not afraid to get his gloves a little dirty, fares well.

Synergy Run Amok

Showdown in the corporate boardroom

IN GOOD COMPANY: Written and directed by Paul Weitz. Produced by Chris Weitz, Paul Weitz. Executive producers, Rodney M. Liber and Andrew Miano. Cinematography, Remi Adefarasin. Editor, Myron I. Kerstein. Original music, Stephen Trask. Production design, William Arnold. Costume design, Molly Maginnis. Starring Dennis Quaid, Topher Grace and Scarlett Johansson, with Marg Helgenberger, David Paymer, Clark Gregg, Philip Baker Hall, Selma Blair and Frankie Faison. Universal Pictures, 2004. PG-13. About 110 minutes.

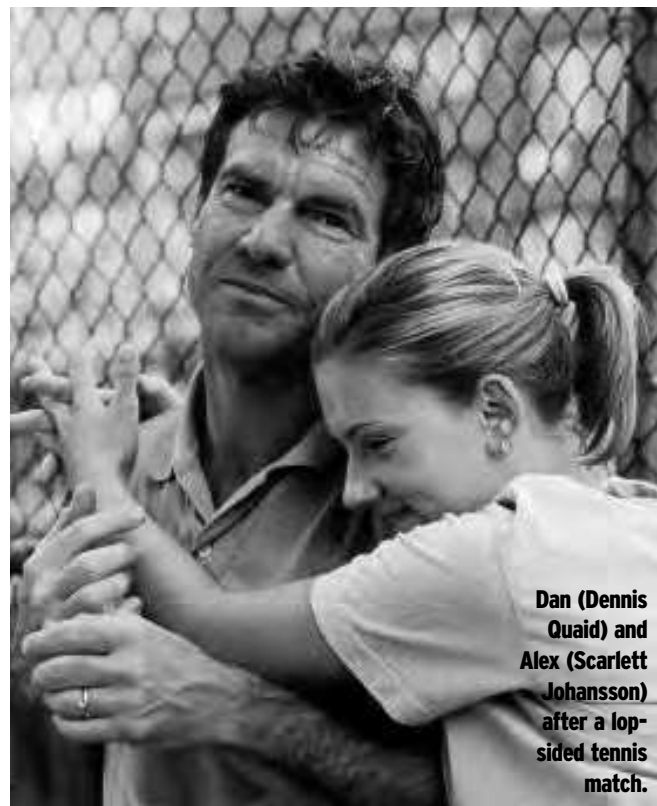
This likable mainstream comedy by Paul Weitz (*About a Boy*) has a lot going for it. The affable Dennis Quaid stars as Dan Foreman, devoted husband, kind father and director of advertising sales at *Sports America* magazine. Scarlett Johansson is Alex Foreman, an 18-year-old tennis contender, Dan's college-age daughter and a knock-out beauty. And Topher Grace plays Carter Duryea, the ambitious new marketing hot dog, who turns their worlds upside down.

Corporate takeovers in the publishing industry have been endemic for a number of years, with print ownership falling into ever fewer fiefdoms, magazines rushing to fill specialty niches, and general readership magazines declining. But the physical body-slam of walking into your own office to discover you've been fired, downgraded or made redundant is *In Good Company*'s take-off point. Although millions of older American workers in blue- and white-collar jobs have experienced what Dan's facing, no one's had as much fun since Maggie Thacker's Draconian labor policies spawned the good-natured Brit flick *The Full Monty*.

Dan is the same good-guy character Dennis Quaid has built his career playing. But now Dan is 50something, looking at career change, a new child coming (pregnant wife Ann is played by TV's Marg Helgenberger) and the financial challenge of more money for his daughter's NYU tuition. Insultingly, his new boss is a 26-year-old MBA, who's never sold ads before. Gulp!

The movie's best moments come when Dan and Carter try to work out their unstable, new relationship. Although the men are alike in some ways, both change, which is remarkable in itself. Carter grows because he's finally found a role model worth emulating. Grace makes Carter's loneliness and need to be loved believable without being maudlin. For his part, Quaid's Dan swallows the bitterness of displacement and illustrates the maturity responsibility brings to his co-workers.

If you're seen the trailers, you know something sly and delicious passes between Alex and Carter a short time before the ax falls on Dan's head. They meet in the elevator, and Carter con-



Dan (Dennis Quaid) and Alex (Scarlett Johansson) after a lopsided tennis match.

UNIVERSAL PICTURES, 2004.

fesses to this perfect stranger that he has no idea what he's doing. Forbidden, secret relationships have their own allure.

In a manic cameo performance, Malcolm McDowell pockets the picture for a few minutes as the raving Teddy K, CEO of Globecom, the megacompany that bought the magazine and fired most of its staff. Teddy K is a blithering idiot, of course, spouting nonsense about synergy to the troops while demanding cutthroat tactics and unswerving loyalty. Think publishing giant Rupert Murdoch as a smarmier Werner Erhard-like character running an est group-training.

Writer, director, producer Paul Weitz likes the characters he's created here, with the result that we like them, too, even corporate shark Steckle (Clark Gregg), the film's most easily despised character. And I appreciate Dan's advice to Carter about marriage: Find someone you want to be in the foxhole with, and keep your pants zipped when you're out of the foxhole. (Maybe Dan said trenches, but after seeing *A Very Long Engagement*, I can't go there.)

Now playing at Cinema World and Cinemark, the engaging *In Good Company* is not a great film, but it is a really good movie. **EW**