



A COOL, AGING TECHNO-THRILLER

Skyfall doesn't stray far from the Bond formula

SKYFALL: Directed by Sam Mendes. Written by Neil Purvis, Robert Wade and John Logan. Cinematography, Roger Deakins. Editing, Stuart Baird. Music, Thomas Newman. Starring Daniel Craig, Judi Dench, Javier Bardem, Naomie Harris, Ben Whishaw and Ralph Fiennes. Columbia Pictures, 2012. 143 minutes. PG-13. ★★☆☆☆

Note to spy agencies the world over: Perhaps you might want to consider not storing sensitive information about field agents in a laptop. This is the clever decision that kicks off the plot of Sam Mendes' *Skyfall*, the latest entry into the Bond-gets-serious reboot that began with the entertaining *Casino Royale* and then

plummeted with the absurd *Quantum of Solace*. *Skyfall* sits right between those two, a mostly watchable, beautifully shot techno-thriller that clings to just a few of the old Bond tropes.

This time around, our villain isn't trying to take over the world (or a country, or a continent or whatever). He just has a bone to pick with M (Judi Dench). Targeting her with loving, explosive care, an evil mastermind steals the aforementioned hard drive (nearly killing Bond in the process; he gets a bit of R&R out of the deal), hacks into MI-6's computers and, in a brazen move, explodes MI-6

from within. This is enough to lure Bond back to London, to country and duty and the oversight of a rather rattled M, who sends him back out into the field despite his inability to pass so much as a word-association test.

Skyfall plays up the idea of an aging, tired Bond and a possibly outdated, past her prime M, as if in preparation for Bond to regenerate into a younger actor once again (Craig is listed for the next two Bond films on IMDB). This gives the film a bit of gravity, but it also strips away any remaining sense of fun. New-era Bond is cool, elegant, deadly, stoic and, with Roger Deakins behind the camera, *Skyfall* is gorgeous and sleek, the cinematic equivalent of an expensive car with a seductively purring motor. The plot almost makes sense, and the secondary characters — including Naomie Harris as a field agent and the wonderful Ben Whishaw as the young new Q — all seem to be having enough fun to nearly balance out Bond's morose, soulless seriousness.

Ninety percent of the time, *Skyfall* is a deft spy thriller, nicely paced and perfectly acted, with only occasional thudding moments of ridiculousness. Javier Bardem slithers through his villainous role; Judi Dench commands the screen even as M's command is questioned; Daniel Craig's shoulders, squarely framed under some really lovely suits, continue to deserve their own billing in the credits. If you're fond of the Bond formula, there's much to like here — but there are also eye roll-inducing moments in which the franchise stubbornly clings to the sexism of its past. If Bond can have a new car, a new Q, a new hair color; if the exploding pens can be replaced with palm-coded guns and the villains can learn to nibble rather than chew the scenery; if the action can be smartly shaped to be about the characters, not about the spectacle, then spare me the "But that's how Bond is!" regarding women. Seduce all the ladies you want, James; just don't stick them all in the ground or behind a desk. ■

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