



Jack Nicholson and Maria Schneider in *The Passenger*

STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

The Passenger

review by Girish Shambu

Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Passenger*, starring Jack Nicholson, was first released in 1975. It met with a baffled and lukewarm response, but gained a small cult following. Thirty years later, it has been restored and re-released. Amazingly, the response this time around has been almost unanimously rapturous. Roger Ebert has written a glowing review that completely reverses his original pan of the movie. It now looks like it was ahead of its time, and we the audience are now finally ready for it.

Jack Nicholson plays a star TV reporter hunting for a guerrilla group in the African desert. Lost, frustrated, and emotionally desolate, he stumbles into the hotel room of a man who has dropped dead of a heart attack. On an impulse, he switches passports, clothes, and possessions—and takes on a new identity. As he starts to walk in the dead man's shoes, keeping his appointments, burrowing deeper into his new and unfamiliar role, he realizes that the man was a gun-runner. He meets a young and liberated architecture student (Maria Schneider from *Last Tango In Paris*) and soon finds that danger and intrigue are right around the corner.

But *The Passenger* is not your usual thriller. It doesn't move at breakneck speed but instead takes a leisurely stroll through the landscape. The movie was shot on location in Algeria, Germany, Great Britain and Spain, and Antonioni has a keen sense of how to capture a strange place in a visually striking manner. His physical spaces—like the breathtaking Gaudi buildings in Barcelona—seem to dwarf their characters. This magnifies the existential quandaries of the characters, questioning the meaning of their alienated lives.

Given Antonioni's strong visual touches, *The Passenger* is ultimately a "director's movie" more than an "actor's movie." Still, Jack Nicholson's performance is a thing of wonder: it's scrupulously minimal, completely instinctive, and you could write a small book about its profuse subtleties. I could not take my eyes off him. The inscrutable motives of the character, the quaintly dated seventies attire, the miniscule amount of dialogue—none of these comes close to detracting from Nicholson's enormous charisma. Suddenly, I realized the great power of his speech inflections, the effortless precision of his body movements, and his repertoire of fleeting gestures and expressions. But it took this spare and languid film to see all that. A different film, swirling thick with plot, dialogue and movement, might have made the richness of his performance easier to miss.

The movie contains, towards the end, one of the most famous moving camera shots in film history. Somewhere near Gibraltar, Nicholson falls back exhausted on a hotel bed, and the camera mysteriously moves out of the room, and impossibly through the bars of the window into the courtyard, hovering around before circling back. I won't tell you what discoveries it makes, but it's a scene that is strangely wonderful even if—or perhaps because—one doesn't quite know how to make it all neatly add up. Sometimes, being in the dark and not being given all the answers feels right because it's true to life.

The Passenger plays on Feb. 21 only at the Emerging Cinemas screen at the Market Arcade Film and Arts Center.

av

“★★★★”
A TRULY REFRESHING ROMANTIC COMEDY.”
COSMOPOLITAN

“HUMOROUS, WITTY AND SOPHISTICATED.”

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