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Movies

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'The Kingdom' is Cold War redux

DEBORAH NICOL • DESERT POST WEEKLY • SEPTEMBER 27, 2007

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The good ol' Cold War movies of yore have been replaced. We know our cinematic enemy, and it is the Middle East.

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In case "The Kingdom's" audience is ignorant of the house that oil built, occupied by kicking bedfellows Saudi Arabia and the United States, director Peter Berg ("Friday Night Lights") provides a slick rundown for an ADD generation. It spans from the discovery of Saudi oil to Osama bin Laden and September 11, with an asterisked factoid that 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudis. The history is quick and dirty, as is the blanket labeling of an enemy country.

Cut to a slice of American apple pie, plunk in the middle of a Riyadh compound for oil company employees and their families. The kids are playing softball as hot dogs cook and parents cheer. Without warning, disguised bad guys slip past the gates and begin to attack indiscriminately. The baseball field is decimated, leaving a battle zone that requires an investigation by the best of the best, the FBI.

Enter our heroes. They are tough-talking and ready for action in order to avenge the death of a close comrade. Jamie Foxx leads the team by tossing out one-liners and making inappropriate threats to superiors that should end his career. Jennifer Garner provides neat little explanatory paragraphs with chunks of history that

her co-workers should know. These are for the audience's benefit, but the lectures feel false and unnecessary. Jason Bateman wisecracks as a Jew in enemy territory who provides as much ignorance as he is given, and Chris Cooper falls to the background as a sage country boy.

For elite special agents, these investigators could not be any more uninformed of traditions and customs (one even carries a "Koran for Dummies" book). While stumbling over formalities, they cover mistakes with the sort of excessive bravado that plagues the reputation of Americans involved in international relations.

Filmgoers should not expect anything more than explosions that detonate perfectly and magic bullets that kill the enemy but bounce off the heroes. The camera is jumpy and the battles are dizzying, as the good guys often escape without a scratch while the bad guys get a well-deserved knife to the head.

Berg does not forget to apply a sympathetic salve, as scenes of innocent children up the pity factor. His mixed messages include the epiphany that everyone comes from a family. As Foxx's character tells a kindergarten class about his son's birth, a Saudi associate prays with his children and a terrorist teaches his son to stay alert during an attack. Berg dips into the argument of nature versus nurture, but never quite completes the lesson.

A blunt message exemplifying the endless cycle of war will be misconstrued by many as a patriotic battle cry justifying the next attack. As one nation judges another for senseless revenge, the mirror reflects harshly.

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Universal Pictures

Jamie Foxx (kneeling), as FBI man Ronald Fleury, leads a team of investigators including Jennifer Garner (form left), Ali Suliman and Chris Cooper in "The Kingdom."

'THE KINGDOM'

Rated: R for profanity, violence

Time: 1 hour, 50 minutes

Genre: Drama

Starring: Jamie Foxx, Jennifer Garner, Jason Bateman, Chris Cooper

Director: Peter Berg

Showing: Opens Friday.

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