

THE SPANISH PRISONER

[1998]

by

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The Spanish Prisoner. Directed by David Mamet, Produced by Jean Doumanian, Written by David Mamet, Cinematography by Gabriel Beristoin. Distributed by Sony Pictures Classics, 1998.

While on a business trip to the Bahamas with his boss, Mr. Klein (Ben Gazzara), inventor/theoretician Joe Ross (Campbell Scott) meets rich, worldly businessman Jimmy Dell (Steve Martin) and strikes up a friendship. Back in New York, Joe is worried that the company may not reward him adequately for his invention, “The Process,” and turns to Jimmy for advice. He soon slips into the vortex of a strange world of deception where no one is who they first seem to be: When he suspects that Jimmy is trying to get the Process for himself, he turns to the FBI who, in turn, are in league with Jimmy. When he is framed for the theft of The Process, and a murder to boot, it seems the only people he can trust are his secretary, Susan (Rebecca Pidgeon), a seemingly simple girl who has a very large crush on him, and the local police. Soon, however, the police are convinced he is a murderer. Susan, it turns out, is in on the scam within a scam. Finally, U. S. Marshals disguised as Japanese tourists (“No one notices Japanese tourists.”) save him and reveal that Mr. Klein was behind it all. (PG).

The Spanish Prisoner is the intellectual/filmic equivalent to the current Hollywood mainstay of the “mixed genre.” Here, however, it is not genres like science fiction and comedy that are mixed. Instead, *The Spanish Prisoner* is a concoction born of writer/director David Mamet as a psychologist and archivist of dysfunctional contemporary male role models combined with the techniques of Alfred Hitchcock. The Process, the object of everyone’s hunt, is Hitchcock’s famous “McGuffin,” the irrelevancy that becomes the central concern of the screen characters but is simply a device for the film maker to explore the characters. When taken out of the film’s context, the “McGuffin” is often ridiculous enough to draw at least a smile (like the uranium ore hidden in wine bottles in *Notorious* [1946] or the mysterious golden glow in the briefcase in *Pulp Fiction* [1994]). Mamet never reveals The Process to the audience. This is in keeping with the general playfulness of the film: When Joe looks at a framed picture of Jimmy’s sister, reflection blocks our view; when Joe writes the value of The Process on a piece of paper, the camera only views the unseen numbers from the back. This visual light-heartedness defuses any nastiness that might arise in the audience – and there is nastiness in spades in *The Spanish Prisoner*.

While *The Spanish Prisoner* is new Mamet, it is still old Mamet: the ping-pong dialogue is smart, tight, sophisticated, and staccato. The acting is as mannered as ever, rigid and unconvincing, with a heavy pall of alternate reality. But Mamet's achieved something new. There is practically no profanity (thus a very welcome PG rating).

What is further fascinating in *The Spanish Prisoner* is how cleverly form follows function. Mamet's definition of a con is in his admonishment-laden writing – you can never tell when following a pithy and valid-sounding piece of advice will help you survive or lead to your doom. “Always do business as if the person you're doing business with is trying to screw you. Because most likely they are. And if they're not, you can be pleasantly surprised.” Jimmy's astute advice to Joe could easily be Mamet's to the audience, “Watch your back and get a lawyer.” On the other hand, we hear, “Basically, people are what they seem to be.” A lie.

The con aspect of the film treats how the modern world's corporate greed destroys trust and corrupts the honest. The lesson we take home is a series of negative invectives on how to avoid victimization: become hard and insensitive, lower expectations of others and raise one's own suspicion of the world. In many ways this prescription for paranoia echoes the darkest days of the Cold War. Here Joe is victimized by his betters (there is always an edge of social and economic comment in Mamet) in almost every way imaginable – physical, financial, moral, sexual, ethical, and psychological.

But *The Spanish Prisoner* goes further than “mere” victimization – it dives into all pervasive paranoia and helplessness. Here Mamet's interest in social psychology kicks in. In Joe (the “Average Joe”?), he deflates the Kennedy-era icon of the scientist being at the top of the intellectual heap (after all, in how many adventures films does a bespectacled scientist save the world, whose glasses conveniently disappear half-way through the film, usually when he meets the beautiful love interest). Self-described Boy Scout, Joe is ill-suited to escape unscathed from the labyrinthine snares laid before him. And the “Boy Scout” image is well chosen in its resonances of everything American. All the traditional values associated with this image have, according to Mamet, become useless in surviving in this cowardly new world. Now the conflict is no longer between easily deciphered ideologies, but between two types of greed: primitive greed (Joe) and very sophisticated greed (Klein).

By the time we get to the end of the film, we are so filled with suspicion and doubt that we suspect that even the *deus ex machina* ending might be just another switchback on the twisty road this film has followed. Or is Mamet throwing his net of suspicion and doubt beyond what we see on the screen and into the audience itself by questioning the very form of the film that he is making? The wrap up is too neat, too sudden and too tight. Is he toying with us by now pointing his finger at what the Hollywood audience has always demanded as a satisfying ending? Is he pushing his paranoia off the screen into our laps and declaring that the “real” (as opposed to the “reel”) world is a place we can never truly make sense of?

All this is supported, as it is in every interesting film, by a delightful web of symbolism. A creature of habit and repetition, Joe's life depends on the familiar and comfortable. Thus, the setup begins on an island where he is symbolically isolated from all that he knows. Freed, he immediately begins exploring areas of himself he has repressed. For instance, he buys himself some expensive clothes. He is thus primed to plunge into another previously forbidden area of his psyche – greed. The con artists, being good psychologists always, know that to con Joe, all they need to do is to selectively activate repressed areas of his psyche and, at the same time, isolate him from the balancing influences of the familiar. Thus, the island is a perfect geographical symbol for what is happening to him.

Another example: Escaping from a murder scene where he has been lured into being the obvious suspect, he dives into the subway to escape the police. If we equate geography with psychology (as we are asked to do in the opening island scenes), going underground is the perfect metaphor for entering into the unconscious. And this makes sense, since it is here, in Joe's "underground" that he begins to realize that the surface world, the world of normal consciousness, is not all it seems to be. It is this connection with the unconscious that finally leads him to the truth. It is here that he has an opportunity to get past the blocking effects of both his greed and inflated ego.

We must be very careful here, for what Mamet does to the plot conventions he also does to the symbolism. We would expect the feminine to be Joe's salvation. (Think of almost any James Bond film – the scene with James tied to a chair and about to face death at the hands of the villain; who walks in to release him?) Like the rest of *The Spanish Prisoner*, the film turns against expectations, against conventions (even psychological ones). At this point, we would expect Susan, his naive admirer and outspoken seductress, to pull him out of the fire. She does . . . but only for a moment, until she is revealed to be in league with the villains.

This rejection of the ancient psychological formula of male salvation through the feminine has interesting consequences. (This is new to Mamet: in *Homicide* [1991], it is the memory of the perfect woman that brings salvation to a dying character.) Just as Mamet rejects current male stereotypes as dysfunctional, so he rejects the feminine ones, too. Just as Joe's "Boy Scout" psyche is inadequate to deal with the complexities of real-world greed, so should Susan's innocence and wide-eyed admiration of him (she openly offers to sleep with him) be dysfunctional. Her alternation between cringing gamin and self-confident whore should immediately make us suspicious. Neither hesitant naïveté nor self-satisfying aggression are functional roles. They work only to con their male equivalent – Joe. In the end, to demonstrate their inadequacy, Susan goes to jail.

There are two major problems with *The Spanish Prisoner*. First is the timing. In 1987 when Mamet did *House of Games* [1987], the concept of conspiracy within conspiracy had not yet reached the status of pop cult icon and *The X-Files* were not yet a gleam in Chris Carter's eye. Today, conspiracy theories (there is even a movie by that title!) are at best mundane (we all know that it was Elvis, under mind control by a diet

plan invented by aliens, who shot John Kennedy, because we read it on the Internet). In *The Spanish Prisoner*, Mamet elaborates the conspiracy/paranoia idea, but never refreshes it, never gives it new life.

The second problem with *The Spanish Prisoner* is the isolation of the central character. Mamet's ploy is often to isolate his characters and then reveal some inner layer that can only blossom with the outside influences that have previously kept it hidden. Joe, the victimized central character, is a cipher, never fleshed out or clearly defined. Joe never has to confront his own deepest motivations either as a scientist or a human being as did the psychologist of *House of Games* [1987], or the millionaire in *The Edge* [1997], or the academics in *Oleanna* [1994], or the Jews of *Homicide* [1991]. Joe remains mired in self-denial and self-control, a place Mamet rarely allows his characters to remain. Once he begins to peel back the layers of the conspiracy laid against him, Joe learns, but he doesn't grow.

Corollary to this problem is Joe's passivity. While in *House of Games* (which this film closely resembles) the (female) hero realizes she's being scammed and gets revenge on her tormentors; Joe remains ever passive. Saved by the police, he learns nothing. But then again, who would want to learn the psychically destructive lesson that the key to life is to trust no one, that eternal vigilance is the watchword, that we live in a world that punishes anyone who lives by a code of ethics? The rather depressing bottom line of *The Spanish Prisoner* is the advice any gambler will give you, "Have faith, but cut the cards."

Nevertheless, *The Spanish Prisoner* is a fun, exciting film, one that never insults the audience's intelligence. Imagine the recent *The Game* [1997] and remove much of the glitz and glitter, the over-the-top paranoia (everyone in San Francisco has been co-opted) and replace that, ounce for ounce, pound for pound, with sophistication and intelligence and you have *The Spanish Prisoner*. At the same time a much smaller and a much bigger film.

(And if you get the feeling that the convoluted world of Franz Kafka is hovering just outside the camera shot, you may be right. The most obvious echo is Kafka's *The Trial*, in which Joseph (Joe, get it?) K. is hounded for a crime that he desperately – and unsuccessfully – tries to name. But there is more here than a generalized, insubstantial reference: the original German title of *The Trial* is *Der Prozess*.)

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