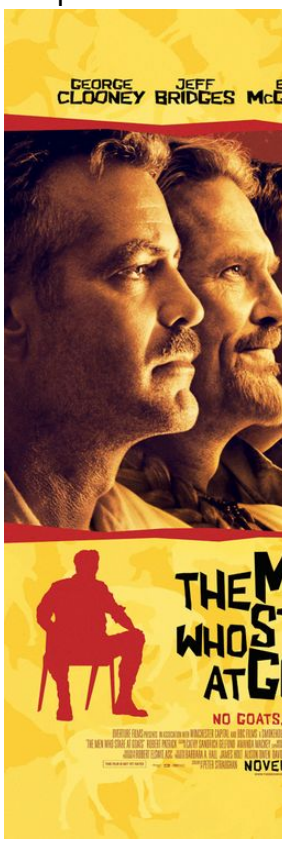
Sometimes you watch a movie, and you enjoy it for no apparent reason. "The Men Who Stare at Goats" is one such movie. It's satire, but not great satire. It has very good, but not great performances from two of the lead actors, along with semi-disappointing performances from the other two. It has a plot that meanders about all over the place, without ever making much sense. And it has an ending that leaves you a bit befuddled, but not totally confused or upset at the conclusion. So why did Mitch enjoy it? He tells us in his latest movie review.



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So why did I enjoy it? Frankly, I'm hard to put to say exactly why, but since this is a review, and things like that are expected, I would say that it was enjoyable mostly because George Clooney and Ewan McGregor sold it to me with their conviction in their roles.

Clooney was great in his role as Sgt. Lyn Cassady, retired from the Earth Battalion of the Army, a group of psychics "trained" by the Army to harness their paranormal abilities for the benefit of the military. The unit was founded by Lt. Col. Bill Django (Jeff Bridges), a former commander in Vietnam who was wounded when his fresh-off-the-boat charges couldn't bring themselves to fire upon the enemy (who had no qualms firing at them). Disillusioned, Bill set off to discover the secrets of the human psyche, but ended up totally immersed into the New Age movement, sure that he and his trained "Jedi Warriors" could marshal the powers of the Earth to confront and defeat the enemy in non-lethal ways.

McGregor is along for the ride as journalist Bob Wilton, a reporter for a small Ann Arbor, MI paper who decides to abandon his cozy life once his wife leaves him for his editor, so he takes an assignment in the Middle East at the start of the war in Iraq. But he can't seem to get clearance to leave Kuwait for the "action", until he meets up with Cassady, who tells him in bits and pieces about the Earth Battalion.

Cassady tells Wilton that his unit has been re-activated after almost 20 years, and that he's on a mission.

What ensues is a road comedy, interspersed with flashbacks regarding the formation and early years of the Earth Battalion, with everything playing with tongue firmly planted in cheek. What are they really trying to do?

No one seems to know or to care...the fun is in watching them get there.

In lesser hands, this would have been a terrible movie. But Clooney and McGregor make it watchable by completely buying into it without the slightest hesitation.

There is no mugging or smirking this time from Clooney (like "Leatherheads").

Cassady is a full blown nut-case, and Clooney relishes the opportunity to dive head first into the lunacy.

At no point are we really expected to fully believe in Cassady's "renowned powers as the greatest Jedi in the Battalion".

But that doesn't matter as HE believes it, and Clooney totally sells it to the audience.

McGregor is the perfect foil for Clooney. He plays Wilton as a total innocent, a man who knows

he is in way over his head...and is dealing with a loon...but is too wrapped up in the story to step away from it. As with Clooney, this works because McGregor is totally committed to playing the role straight.

I kept waiting for the former Obi-Wan Kenobi to roll his eyes just once when Cassady kept mentioning Jedis, but to his credit, he never flinched.

All of this said about the two main characters, I still couldn't give you a good explanation of what this movie was about. With good satire, you should at least know who you are making fun of, but that never seems to be an objective for director (and frequent Clooney collaborator) Grant Heslov, or scriptwriter Peter Straughan. Are they making fun of the military? The War in Iraq? The New Age Movement?

Maybe...but there is no real bite to any of it.

Mostly they seem to be making fun of the perceived reputation of the four stars, but in any case, it's all pretty harmless.

Part of the fun is in looking at the claim that "more of this is true than you would like to believe".

The original book was from Jon Ronson, a bit of a gonzo journalist in the Hunter Thompson style, who wrote of the Army's effort to look into this sort of weirdness.

The main reason?

The Russians were reportedly doing it...so the U.S. didn't want to fall behind.

Obviously, McGregor is playing a fictionalized version of Ronson, and you can pick out quite a few techniques and/or tactics brought out in this film that probably were used by the military at one point.

My biggest disappointment of this film had to do with how Jeff Bridges and Kevin Spacey were used. As in; not very well. These are two tremendously talented actors, and they were completed wasted in this film. In Bridges case, that may be literally as well as figuratively, as his character seems to have spent the entire time in the van with Jeff Spicoli
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Bridges' characterization was one-hundred percent caricature-ization, as he seemed to want to

make Bill Django the stoner doppelganger of Col. Kurtz from "Apocalypse Now"...and it just didn't work for me.

Neither did Kevin Spacey as the antagonist of the picture, Larry Hooper. At no time was Spacey really able to deliver the droll, snarky wit that he is best at.

Instead, Hooper is nothing more than a Frank Burns to Clooney's Hawkeye Pierce; a jealous incompetent bound and determined to sabotage our hero.

I personally don't know if Spacey mailed it in on this performance, if better parts got left on the cutting room floor, or if Heslov did that poor of a job directing.

Being that this is the first major picture directed by Heslov, best known to me as one of Arnold Schwarzenegger's partners in "True Lies", I think the blame would probably go to him.

All in all, "The Men Who Stare at Goats" is one of those movies that I like a lot more as a movie fan than as a movie critic. I can't really call it a disappointment, because it did meet my expectations entertainment-wise. One thing it did not do was to take itself too seriously, and then drown itself in its own sea of self-importance (like "Surrogates", "The International", and "The Taking of Pelham 123" for recent dramas).

Nor did it smugly flaunt its own cleverness and the wittiness of its cast (like "Duplicity").

However, I really can't forgive it for being almost two hours of near-nothing...even if it was amusing nothingness.

So unless you are a George Clooney hater (and we know there are a lot of you out there), this would probably be an amusing rental when it comes to dvd.

My Rating - Bill Nelsen (2 ½ footballs)