Two films about Latin America: distortion and reaction

Assassination Tango and The Dancer Upstairs

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Assassination Tango, *written and directed by Robert Duvall;* The Dancer Upstairs, *directed by John Malkovich, written by Nicholas Shakespeare, based on his novel*

Two recent films directed by prominent American actors deal with Latin American political intrigue in an odd partnership with dance.

Superficially the similarities end there, but on a more substantive level, the movies share a deeply disoriented and right-wing bent.

That both Robert Duvall's *Assassination Tango* and John Malkovich's *The Dancer Upstairs* are set in Latin America, and as their titles denote, have dance themes, led one reviewer to suggest that perhaps "Latin American politics is a dangerous dance." The "dangerous dance" metaphor is really not appropriate for the films' depiction of the region's political traumas. It could, however, be used to characterize the way in which both films attempt to deal with their relevant political realities, in that each in its own way "dangerously" stomps on the truth. Essentially these are stupid films whose political conceptions range from the ambiguously to the openly reactionary.

In *Assassination Tango*, Duvall stars as John J. Anderson, an ace hit-man contracted to kill an Argentinean general responsible for many politically motivated "disappearances" in the 1970s. John J. lives happily in Brooklyn, New York with girlfriend Maggie (Kathy Baker), who loves him and his financial generosity, but hasn't a clue about the nature of his profession. Sympathetically portrayed as a father-figure, John J. dotes obsessively on Maggie's young daughter Jenny.

The harmony of this unlikely family unit is the product of the murderer's need, in the twilight of his successful career, to settle down. The fact that a cold-blooded assassin is presented as a fit role-model and guardian is one of the film's central absurdities. Duvall apparently believes that psychopaths—or his idealized version of them—should be given a fair shake. The film's production notes ridiculously assert, "He's a man of skill and honor, a criminal with a deep appreciation for beauty, culture, and dance." The idea of a tango-loving, killer-for-hire engaged in an incessant struggle to "beat" the aging process, must make more sense in Duvall's head than it does in reality.

John J. goes to Argentina to fulfill the contract, possessing no interest in his target's politics or past crimes: "There are two sides to every story," he boasts. Why aggrieved Argentines would bother engaging an assassin from a different continent is not explained. In general, there is an air of condescension in John J.'s dealings with his Argentinean contractors.

While awaiting his opportunity to knock off the general, John J. becomes entranced by the world of tango. Trite clichés now fly fast and furiously, such as "tango is life—tango is love—tango is hate—tango is everything." Duvall would like his irritating, quirky mannerisms to fill the void in the narrative. He begins an involvement with tango-dancer Manuela (Luciana Pedraza—Duvall's real life partner, some 40 years his junior).

Unbeknownst to John J., he has been set up by a mole in the operation. A vengeful military, however, is no match for the hit-man and he eludes all obstacles and completes the job (another unconvincing scene). In due course, all the conspirators except the American assassin are killed. John J. miraculously evades capture and gets himself safely back to Brooklyn to return to normal family life—his loved ones gushing in admiration for their rough-and-ready benefactor.

How a Yankee with a Wild West appearance and demeanor could prevail in accomplishing a complex assassination of a high-level military man living under state protection in a Latin American country must remain an enigma. John J. is not exactly invisible in a crowd—an extreme disadvantage, one would think, for a hit-man. The image of the "Ugly American" is here updated in this homage to a swaggering maverick who runs roughshod over lesser creatures and their quaint little nations.

Another serious weakness is the manner in which Duvall chooses to depict opposition to right-wing forces, although opposition may be too strong a word in this case. In an interview Duvall explained that making his character a hit-man contracted to perform an assassination in Argentina was merely a device to get to the real crux of the film—dabbling in the tango world: "Somebody suggested going down there to get one of those generals who got immunity in those dirty wars in the '70s and that made sense. Kind of like a right wing being hired to go down and kill a right wing."

In addition to revealing Duvall's lack of serious motivation, the plot contrivance demonstrates a total lack of understanding of the relationship of Argentines to the criminality of the military. Relatives and supporters of the 30,000 victims of the military dictatorship (1976-83) have not sought revenge by hiring hit-men.

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Blocked by reactionary governments from prosecuting the murderers and torturers, opponents of the military continue to organize exposures of the criminals, to demonstrate (including the famous Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo) in remembrance of the *Desaparecidos*, or Disappeared and, generally, to demand justice by means of mass action.

Duvall's politics play a role in the film's flagrant and thoughtless implausibilities. The 72-year-old actor, described as "an outspoken Republican," supported the US aggression against Iraq. "When someone invades your country [?] something's gotta be done," Duvall told *blackfilm.com*, presumably referring to the September 11 attacks, in answer to a question regarding his view of the impending war against Iraq. Following Michael Moore's comments at the Academy Awards, he stated that Hollywood political activists ("mink-coat liberals") should "keep their mouths shut."

Duvall is described in the film's production notes as having cultivated a passionate relationship with not only the tango "but with the Argentine people, culture and music." The notes say he "even performed the tango with Luciana Pedraza at a 1999 White House state dinner for the president of Argentina [Carlos Menem]." And we know how close Menem is to his people!

Assassination Tango, despite the populist proclivities of Duvall's character and his love of the dance—whose real magic the film only partially captures—testifies to the fact that the actor is oriented more to the Argentine ruling elite than he is to the populace. But mostly he is oriented to his ego and his fantasies.

Scripted by Nicholas Shakespeare from his novel of the same title, *The Dancer Upstairs* marks the directorial debut of actor John Malkovich. Set in an unnamed South American country, the film is loosely based on real events that took place Peru in the early 1990s when police hunted down Abimael Guzman, the leader of the Maoist Shining Path guerrilla organization.

Spanish actor Javier Bardem plays Agustin Rejas, a lawyer turned sensitive cop who finds himself heading up the search for terrorists who hang dead dogs from lampposts bearing signs that read: "Whenever I hear the word culture, I reach for my revolver."

Suicide bombings performed by young children and other types of violence lead to a string of murders of government officials. All the terrorists involved extol someone named President Ezequiel, presumably the guerrilla leader. Primitive slogans invoking philosopher Immanuel Kant identify the efforts of a popularly supported guerrilla outfit.

Restless in a marriage with a superficial, social-climbing wife, Rejas falls for his daughter's ballet teacher Yolanda (Laura Morante). He is attracted by her wistful and artistic soul. Unfortunately, the film's truly unbelievable finale involves Yolanda's Jekyll/Hyde character: she is actually a rabid terrorist and leading accomplice of Ezequiel. Another amateurish twist is that the latter, supposedly a charismatic leader able to control the minds of a large section of the population, turns out to be a pudgy lightweight plagued with eczema and devoid of ideas. This is jarring because it is allegiance to this man that drives most of the film's action. Despite Yolanda's raging hatred for her lover-turned-captor, Rejas still loves the dancer-guerrilla. In the end, through his daughter's dancing, he is able to obtain what he craves most—a part of Yolanda's artistic spirit.

The innumerable holes in plot and character development are minor problems compared to the deeply misanthropic tone of Malkovich's film. *The Dancer Upstairs* also betrays enormous ignorance of history and politics.

Why people chose to fight governmental venality and corruption, even in a misguided manner, is seemingly of no interest to the movie's creator. Main character Yolanda—the dancer upstairs—is presented as an apolitical artist throughout most of the film. Her transition to political lunatic comes out of the blue and is utterly unconvincing despite the best efforts of actress Morante. Malkovich has commented: "I've read some of Shining Path's communiqués, but I'm not really interested in its ideology. I don't believe that murder and butchery are the best ways to solve the problem of social unequality.... For me, the personal histories of the protagonists are more important than the historical details." Malkovich's project fails miserably even in the area of his stated preoccupation.

While sermonizing against terrorist methods in the fight against social inequality in poor countries, Malkovich has advocated assassinating opponents of the American government. He provoked a fury last year when, while addressing students at the Cambridge Union in England, the actor casually mentioned that he would like to shoot independent journalist Robert Fisk and Glasgow Labour MP George Galloway. Both Fisk and Galloway have been critics of US involvement in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as Israeli repression of the Palestinians.

Malkovich has also vilely fulminated in support of the death penalty. The *Chicago Tribune* quoted him as saying: "America's left wing wants criminals coddled, and no one wants to be punished. I would have no problem pushing the switch while having dinner."

In an interview with *The Eagle Online*, the actor/director reveals his very dismal view of the world: "Life is corruption. It really is. And in whatever small or in whatever immense level it is corruption. Rejas, for instance, in this story, is corrupted, but he's corrupted by emotions [his love for Yolanda]. Some people are corrupted by ideologies, some people are corrupted by power, some people are corrupted by money.... Movements [the guerrillas] like this have happened for the better part of the last 50 years. They've killed millions upon millions of people." Malkovich does not follow this last unsubstantiated claim by any criticism of the murderous role that the American government and military have played over the past half century.

"Usually when politics are handled in cinema, and quite often in journalism, it doesn't strike me as particularly well informed. It's just people shooting off their mouths," Malkovich told *Talk.film.co.uk*. At the very least, he has eloquently described his own effort.

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