

# What world is this?

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The *Interpreter* directed by Sydney Pollack, screenplay by Charles Randolph, Scott Frank and Steven Zaillian, based on a story by Martin Stellman and Brian Ward.

Sydney Pollack's *The Interpreter* centers on political intrigue at the United Nations headquarters in New York City and features Nicole Kidman as an interpreter and Sean Penn as a Secret Service agent.

Tobin Keller (Penn) and agency colleague Dot Woods (Catherine Keener) are assigned to the UN after an interpreter, Silvia Broome (Kidman), overhears a death threat against an African dictator, Zuwanie (Earl Cameron), the head of the fictional country of Matobo. Zuwanie, accused of genocide, is scheduled to address the UN General Assembly in order to justify his policies.

In an after-hours visit to the UN, Silvia surreptitiously listens to two conspirators apparently plotting the assassination of Zuwanie. They are speaking into an open microphone in Ku—a rare dialect that few people other than Silvia, a native-born Matoban, understand. The head of the Secret Service (played by Pollack) is concerned that an assassination on American soil would be a public relations fiasco.

Keller and Woods are initially skeptical about Silvia's account of the plot when they uncover that she has a history of participating in demonstrations against Zuwanie. However, after she becomes the target of several murder attempts, Silvia's credibility increases.

Zuwanie's main opponents are Kuman-Kuman, labeled by the Secret Service a "capitalist," and Ajene Xola, a "socialist." The agents raise the possibility that Zuwanie may be staging his own assassination attempt for political gain. At this point, unbeknownst to the outside world, the leftist Xola has fallen victim to Matoban political repression.

With the African country threatening to descend into civil war, Silvia informs Keller that her involvement

with the UN stems from her conviction that the institution is the last great hope for world peace: "The UN is the only place that has a chance of dealing with all of this.... After the rallies [against Zuwanie in Matobo] ended, the rifles came out.... I walked away from Africa because words and compassion are a better way, even if they are slower, than guns."

As Silvia and Keller spar over the efficacy of killing with kindness versus killing with guns, they move towards intimacy. Political differences notwithstanding, they share emotional common ground: she bears the pain of being the rejected lover (because she is white) of the liberation fighter, Xola, and he, of being the cuckolded, then widowed husband. Silvia's pacifist musings—"Vengeance is a lazy form of grief"—resonate until Keller unearths a photo of her decked out in guerrilla fatigues and toting a machine gun.

The romance is destined to remain unconsummated as the movie gets down to business: the fight against terrorism. A bomb blasts through a crowded Brooklyn public bus, killing police and civilians. (One reviewer aptly anoints this scene as the "movie's big payoff to sustain [a] post-9/11 paranoia, and it makes up for all the gaping holes in the plot.") The action culminates with the Secret Service, led by the psychically mangled Keller, thwarting tragedy at the UN.

It would seem that the hallowed halls of the UN have now been made safe. But in a strained and badly executed plot twist, Silvia—now a lapsed conscientious objector—has positioned herself to become the vehicle of Matoban popular vengeance. In a truly unlikely sequence, Keller now assumes the role of preacher of non-violence. Silvia is disarmed, and justice is to be meted out through proper channels as the Matoban autocrat is sent off to the International Criminal Court. To amplify this comforting sentiment, the film closes with a wide-angle view of the Manhattan skyline—a shimmering UN edifice upstaging the tragic high-rise

gap known as Ground Zero since September 11, 2001.

*The Interpreter*, undoubtedly a project close to the heart of its creators, is essentially a liberal fantasy that treats institutions like the United Nations and the politics of these institutions in an idealized, surreal manner. An air of unreality permeates the drama and the performances, as the actors contort themselves in an effort to make flesh and blood the schemas and templates that say more about the filmmakers' conception of the world than about the world itself.

To begin with, Silvia—the cultured, flute-playing, multilingual interpreter—is a UN employee whose translations, if misinterpreted, could trigger global altercations. Is it conceivable that her well-known involvement with a guerrilla struggle would allow a high-security clearance at the UN?

Is it also likely that a federal agent noticeably unhinged by his wife's betrayal and *quite recent* death would be tapped to head a special unit charged with the security of a foreign dignitary targeted for political assassination? Would this man be allowed to flirt with a protectee (and suspect)—with a history of taking up arms against said dignitary—under the nose of the agency during such a mission? Forget the minor detail that the object of affection is also the former lover of the socialist leader of a national liberation movement!

And then there is the much-ballyhooed fact that Pollack was the first filmmaker ever to obtain permission to film inside the UN building. But as several reviewers point out, a single, artificially constructed scene in Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* has more cinema truth than all of Pollack's loving panoramas of the General Assembly.

Keller/Penn skulks about, muttering about his grief as the terror color-code alert hits maximum level. The portrayal of yet another policeman as hero, with Keller being a particularly sensitive specimen, would be laughable if the danger did not exist that certain viewers might take it seriously.

The collaboration between the various levels of local, state and federal agencies, and their great mutual respect, is another one of the film's fantasies, given the long-term and often vicious turf wars that exist within and between America's police forces. Not even the most banal of the ubiquitous television cop shows ever suggests such an idyllic picture of efficient teamwork.

More fundamentally, when it comes to colonial-style

intervention in the African continent, are not all of America's military and intelligence agencies thoroughly compromised and soaked in blood? Unbelievably, the goings-on in Matobo take place as a benign US stands aside. Is there is a single significant coup d'état—in today's language, "regime change"—or attempted coup d'état that does not bear the stamp "Made in the USA"?

The film's hosannas to the UN most clearly establish the politics of the filmmakers and Hollywood liberalism in general. *The Interpreter* lends credence to the Democratic Party's criticism of the Bush administration's "go-it-alone" strategy at the expense of the United Nations, in favor of a more multilateral approach to global conflict. Further, Pollack's film presents the UN as some kind of pristine entity, a neutral arbiter, standing above all nations, instead of the imperialist "thieves' kitchen" (Lenin), where the major powers settle their conflicts and divide the spoils, that it is.

One has the sense that Pollack and company feel especially proud of themselves for having included an advertisement for the International Criminal Court. Now *there* is a serious shot across the bow of Bush and his cabal (who of course do not recognize the court)! This is rather pathetic.

The glaring dramatic disconnects and fissures, as well as the poorly and incoherently drawn characters, must find their origins in part at least in *The Interpreter's* stillborn efforts to bolster illusions in organizations such as the UN. Equally disgraceful is the attempt by its creators under conditions of an escalating drive toward authoritarianism to humanize forces at the service of a desperately repressive ruling elite.



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