

DUEL IN THE SUN

Viggo Mortensen, Kirsten Dunst and Oscar Isaac encounter murder, envy and dark thrills in a stylish adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's novel

The Two Faces Of January

WORDS BY MATT MUELLER



“NO MATTER HOW MANY BAD THINGS CHESTER DOES, I THINK THE AUDIENCE WANTS HIM TO GET AWAY WITH IT.”

VIGGO MORTENSEN

PERFECT MURDERS

The best of Highsmith on celluloid...



Strangers On A Train (1955)
Alfred Hitchcock was the first to enshrine Patricia Highsmith on the big screen with this darkly gripping tale of a homicidal socialite (Robert Walker) who talks a perfect stranger (Farley Granger) into a deadly pact.

Plein Soleil (aka Purple Noon) (1960)
French heartthrob Alain Delon stars as talented mimic Tom Ripley in René Clément's inaugural adaptation of Highsmith's most famed novel, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Clément's classy thriller served as inspiration for Hossein Amini when he came to adapt *The Two Faces Of January*.

The American Friend (1977)
German director Wim Wenders tackled the third of Highsmith's Ripley adventures, *Ripley's Game*. Dennis Hopper headlines as our man Tom, who gets terminally ill family man Bruno Ganz mixed up in murder. Atmospheric but also baffling.



The Talented Mr. Ripley (1999)
With a starry cast headed up by Matt Damon (never better), Jude Law, Cate Blanchett, Gwyneth Paltrow and the late Philip Seymour Hoffman, Anthony Minghella's sumptuous adaptation rose above its predecessors as the most striking and memorable daptation of the author's work.

Ripley's Game (2003)
Set years after the events of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, Tom (played by John Malkovich) is now living a life of luxury until an old criminal acquaintance coaxes him back into his murderous ways. Features a beautiful score by Ennio Morricone.

Joseph Walsh

On a tranquil side street in Istanbul, next to a courtyard filled with inquisitive goats and a gnarled tree that has stood for 1,000 years, Viggo Mortensen, Kirsten Dunst and Oscar Isaac stroll through an outdoor street market heaving with dusty knick-knacks and tattered books. It's 1962, or meant to be, and the actors are appropriately attired for a summer stroll: Mortensen in cream-coloured linen, Dunst in a figure-hugging vintage frock; Isaac looking less moneyed beside them in department-store menswear. We may be in Turkey but today's immaculately dressed location is doubling as Athens, where Isaac's ex-pat tour guide Rydal is earning a crust from wealthy Americans Chester and Colette McFarland.

As the scene unfolds, with Chester purchasing his young wife a gold bracelet she admires after Rydal haggles down the Greek stall owner (and skims a profit for himself in the bargain),

the actors are full of bonhomie between takes. Who knew Mortensen was such a joker? During one pause, he breaks into a rendition of a cheesy 1970s pop song, prompting his co-stars to burst out laughing: "She's as cold as ice/She's willing to sacrifice our looooooove!"

First-time director Hossein Amini, off to the side reviewing the previous take on his monitor, can't help smiling. Even the serious business of crafting an intelligent, sophisticated adult thriller needs moments of light relief. For Amini, the highly praised screenwriter of *The Wings Of The Dove* and *Drive*, *The Two Faces Of January* is a passion project that has stirred his creative juices from the time he first read Patricia Highsmith's offbeat suspense novel, and he has persevered through thick and thin to reach this point. His fascination with Highsmith's tome (one of her more obscure) boils down to its three main characters and the tangled



triangle that develops between them. "The characters always stuck with me," he says. "There's something about the extraordinary compassion Highsmith has for troubled, bad, dangerous people that got under my skin."

In the story, Chester and Rydal are both con artists, albeit operating at different levels. When the former's investor-fleecing activities back home catch up with him,

the latter finds himself sucked into Chester's conspiratorial web, lured partly by his flirtatious attraction to the older man's wife. "When we meet him, there's an unease about Rydal," says Isaac. "He's looking for an identity; he's looking for a father figure." But he gets in over his head as a psychological battle of wits with Chester ensues. As for Colette, Rydal becomes a welcome distraction as the strain of going on the run from Greek police and her husband's

deception take their toll. Ultimately, though, there's a price to pay. "I was playing that line of loving someone but falling out of love with them," says Dunst. "Chester kind of turns into a monster in Colette's eyes and she starts to see Rydal as her knight in shining armour."

It was all fertile ground for Amini in suspense terms, especially as he's having to follow in the footsteps of memorable translations of

Highsmith's work such as Anthony Minghella's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers On The Train*. Hitchcock, in particular, was a touchstone for Amini, and he also steeped himself in French thrillers from the era, including *Plein Soleil*, the original French adaptation of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* featuring the great Alain Delon. "Hoss has made a psychological thriller in the truest sense of the word," observes Isaac. "It's

about exploring the neuroses of these people as they come together and collide."

Amini also makes outstanding use of exquisite locations in Crete, Istanbul and Athens (it's one of the only productions to ever shoot inside the Parthenon). Whether the characters are wandering through the ruins of Knossos or the maze-like alleyways of Istanbul's Grand Bazaar, a sense of period and mystery have been evoked superbly throughout. When Mortensen saw the completed film at the Berlin Film Festival in February, he came away impressed. "I told Hoss, 'This is perfect, it's everything you wanted to do,'" says the actor. "It's elegant, subtle, and the characters stay with you... No matter how many bad things Chester does, I think the audience wants him to get away with it."

The Two Faces Of January is released in UK cinemas on 16 May.

