

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*Ocean's Twelve*]

Not So Dirty Dozen

By Steve Sailer

AS A SEQUEL to a remake, "Ocean's Twelve" sounds dire. Yet in the Year of the Dud, this gleeful heist comedy with George Clooney, Brad Pitt, and Julia Roberts manages to become one of 2004's smartest, most entertaining films by rewriting some of the rules for a commercial screenplay.

Today ought to be a new golden age of movies. Special effects, cinematography, and sound are all steadily progressing. Audiences can now absorb more rapid editing. Budgets are bigger than ever, averaging \$64 million in 2003, so sets and costumes are better than ever. Able character actors are everywhere, and today's big stars have broader skills than their glamorous but repetitious predecessors.

Still, judging from 2004's festival of ineptitude, Hollywood is drifting ever farther from consistent competence. The weak links have been half-baked scripts. Would-be screenwriters throng workshops, so there should be abundant talent available. Sadly, writers and the producers who hire them have worked themselves into self-defeating ruts.

Most remakes fail because producers commission updates of overachieving films, such as Frank Sinatra's "The Manchurian Candidate," in which everything clicked. In contrast, Sinatra's "Ocean's 11" was a notorious under-achiever. The Rat Pack signed on to play

WWII commandos reuniting to knock over five Las Vegas casinos so they could film during the day and croon in the stage shows at night. But they forgot to schedule any snooze time, so they sleepwalked through their roles.

Still, the core concept of an action-comedy caper showcasing male camaraderie was appealing. After Ted Griffin penned a sharp new script, veteran producer Jerry Weintraub and ace director Steven Soderbergh, an Oscar-winner for "Traffic," had little trouble assembling a killer cast. "Ocean's Eleven" was one of the biggest hits of 2001 with adult audiences, who appreciated its 1940s Howard Hawks feel.

The visual chemistry of the gang's leaders was memorable because Pitt exemplifies the scruffy, boyish-looking stars of post-'60s pop culture, while Clooney, who is only three years older but appears to hail from an earlier generation, is a throwback to Clark Gable's era of glamour, when actors tried to look like grown men.

Sequels often fail because the screenplays aren't ready by the time the cameras must start rolling. So Weintraub instead bought newcomer George Nolfi's strong, already-finished script about cat burglars in Europe, "Honor Among Thieves," and had him and Soderbergh adapt it for the ensemble.

Globalization means that about half of box-office revenue now comes from non-English speakers, who admire explosions more than hard-to-translate verbal wit. "Ocean's Twelve," though, reverses the usual ratio, discarding almost all the bang-bang-boom-boom in favor of overlapping jokes delivered at screwball comedy velocity.

In "Ocean's Twelve," these nonviolent crooks are more endearing than ever, making Fagin's tuneful pickpockets in the musical "Oliver" seem as paranoid and murderous as Quentin Tarantino's

"Reservoir Dogs." The new film imagines a crime world descended from some genteel English Ealing Studio comedy, where there is both honor and consummate professionalism among thieves.

Nolfi understands Griffin's insight that with a cast this likeable, the audience will forgive the inevitable stupid plot twists as long as there is an abundance of clever moments.

One of modern Hollywood's hokiest clichés is the multiethnic crime gang. (Real criminals prefer to work with networks of relatives because they can't trust random felons.) When you see a multicultural gang, you can be sure the movie is going to be lame—except the "Ocean's" franchise, which slyly skewered the Eleven's contrived diversity. When Clooney asked Pitt whom they should recruit, he replied, "Off the top of my head, I'd say you're looking at a Boesky, a Jim Brown, a Miss Daisy, two Jethros, and a Leon Spinks, not to mention the biggest Ella Fitzgerald ever."

Nolfi dreams up even more elaborate pseudo-argot that he leaves hilariously undefined, knowing that any explanation couldn't live up to your imagination. At one point, desperately trying to improvise a plan after their first one fails catastrophically, the burglars riff through their voluminous knowledge of their trade's curiously titled ruses, immediately rejecting each as impractical until they pause upon the promising "Hell in a Handbasket." They glance at each other with hope, until Matt Damon interjects, "Nah, can't train a cat that fast."

The soundtrack provides delightful counterpoint. Keep your ears open for "Souls Along the Way," which was composed by Senator Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), who also appeared in Soderbergh's "Traffic." ■

Rated PG-13 for language.

BOOKS

[*Our Oldest Enemy: A History of America's Disastrous Relationship With France*, John J. Miller and Mark Molesky, Doubleday, 304 pages]

French Lessons

By Robert O. Paxton

THE MYTH OF ETERNAL Franco-American friendship is fair game. John J. Miller, a journalist with *National Review*, and Mark Molesky, assistant professor of history at Seton Hall University, offer a counter-myth: that France has directed unstinting malice against America from the beginning.

The book opens with a blood-curdling narrative of the Deerfield massacre (1704), when Indians abetted by French-Canadian authorities attacked English settlers in western Massachusetts. They killed men, women, and children, scalped some of the victims and ate some of their flesh, and abducted hostages. The writing has verve, and the reader's face tingles with anger.

But Miller/Molesky's account is one-sided. It portrays Indian violence as something the French deliberately provoked and exploited. When the Anglo-Americans' Indian allies commit an atrocity, as happened under the young Washington near Pittsburgh in May 1754, it seems an unfortunate accident. Miller/Molesky see the French and Indians as aggressors, the American colonists as their innocent victims. In a broader perspective, however, the Anglo-Americans were expelling the French from North America, and the French were resisting, sometimes cruelly. The French had priority—Quebec's foundation in 1608 predated the Mayflower by a dozen years—but far fewer settlers. It seems a little forgetful to claim, "the United States does not pose and has never posed any threat to their country."

The French weren't even the first who resisted Anglo-American expansion. Spain is really "our oldest enemy." When the English colonists in the Carolinas pushed southwards after founding Charleston in 1670, using Indian surrogates to destroy Spanish forts and missions in what is now Georgia and Florida, the Spanish fought back (admittedly less vigorously than the French). In 1680, they raided English settlements near Charleston. For a similar book about "America's disastrous relationship with Spain" an author could simply trawl through history for the nasty parts: frontier conflicts in late 17th-century Florida, Spain's stranglehold on New Orleans in the late 18th century, the Alamo, the Maine, Hemingway fighting Franco in the bars of Pamplona.

So why single out France? France obviously gets the goat of many Americans. German Chancellor Schroeder surpassed Chirac in the spring of 2003, rejecting any military operation in Iraq even with UN approval. But neither he nor the Russians aroused much popular anger here. Miller/Molesky show no curiosity about this difference or about whether any of the friction with France could come from this side of the Atlantic.

Perhaps a clash of styles provokes a special virulence: the elegantly literary French condescending to nice Americans. A more likely cause is rivalry between two countries that feel entitled, as first democracies, to offer universal moral lessons. Still more likely is American over-expectation based on our aid to the French. We have indeed helped France with thousands of young lives, and in my experience most French admit they "owe their liberty" to the United States, as Jean-Marie Colombani, editor of the Paris daily *Le Monde*, wrote in his famous editorial "We are all Americans" on Sept. 13, 2001 (a passage omitted by Miller/Molesky, who denounce this article heatedly as "an anti-American diatribe of extraordinary virulence and rage"). But often we have not helped them (as in Algeria or at Suez), or helped them late (as in 1917 and 1944),

or caused "collateral damage" like the 50,000 civilian dead in French cities razed by Anglo-American aerial bombardment during World War II. We helped them when we thought it was in our interest. Nothing sours a relationship faster than one side's overdeveloped sense of largesse.

So the Franco-American story is indeed replete with conflict. What Miller/Molesky have done is furnish maximum negative spin and place most blame on the French. A good example is the famous sea battle off the east coast of England on Sept. 23, 1779, between John Paul Jones's *Bonhomme Richard* and the pride of the British Navy, HMS *Serapis*. Every American schoolboy knows Jones's proud response (probably apocryphal) to the British captain's summons to surrender: "I have not yet begun to fight!"

Jones's squadron included three French ships. One French captain, Pierre Landais, aboard *Alliance*, inexplicably held back. Later, when *Serapis* and *Bonhomme Richard* were heavily engaged, wreathed in smoke, Landais came up and fired grapeshot into both combatants. Miller/Molesky have him fire only at Jones's ship, in typical French perfidy. They credit later rumors that Landais wanted to sink Jones's ship and claim the victory for himself. They omit details that don't fit a Francophobic version. The other French captains defeated British ships, though perhaps less dashing than Jones. No French perfidy there. As for Landais, his behavior during the trip home to Boston in *Alliance* was so bizarre (he threatened his main American supporter, Arthur Lee, with a carving knife during a quarrel over a roast turkey) that on return he was court-martialed and removed from service in the infant U.S. Navy. Many contemporaries considered Landais insane. Madness, not Frenchness, seems to have been the problem.

Miller/Molesky portray French malevolence toward Americans as so uniform and unchanging over the centuries as to seem virtually genetic. Their French are, with occasional exceptions like Lafayette and Raymond Aron, cowardly, cynical,