

# A salad served in stingy portions



FILM  
REVIEW  
Freddie  
Sayers

## The Good Shepherd

15 CERT, 167 MINS

If I were the head of a government department, I would have handed in my resignation on Monday morning. Of my 10 expert picks for Oscar glory last week, only three were correct, and they (Helen Mirren, Forest Whitaker and Al Gore) were so obvious that a five-year-old child would have got them right. I have chosen to content myself with the spiky, xenophobic idea that we have superior tastes to the Americans and wouldn't want to agree with them anyway.

One of the few films we do appear to agree on, however, is *The Good Shepherd* (out this week in British cinemas), almost entirely overlooked by the Oscars. It seems that even the 6,000-odd ageing movie industry cronies that make up the Academy of Motion Pictures concluded that, despite its starry cast and classy feel and historical worth and dramatic strengths, *The Good Shepherd* just doesn't quite stack up.

Essentially it is a history lesson about the foundation of the Office of Security Services during the Second World War, and its development into the CIA. It consists of a collection of themes and plots – each of which on its own is quite intriguing – but of which no single story is given enough passion or detail to carry the movie. It is a bad salad of a picture, the ingredients too many, too posh and offered in stingy portions.

The framing plot device is basically a whodunnit. We join Edward Wilson (Matt Damon) in 1961, at the time of the Bay of Pigs fiasco. By now he is in his 40s and a



Matt Damon as agent Edward Wilson in Robert De Niro's 'The Good Shepherd'

senior intelligence official with the CIA; when the operation is botched, he and his colleagues work out that there must have been a leak to the Soviets, and a photograph and sound recording turns up showing the probable leak. They get analysing, while we go walking down memory lane for three whole hours and forget all about it until the end.

Edward Wilson's career fills in the

middle two hours. Loosely based on the life of CIA czar James Jesus Angleton, we see through long flashbacks his recruitment into the notorious Skull and Bones society at Yale, his love affairs and shotgun marriage to society beauty Margaret Russell (Angelina Jolie), his posting to London during the war, his return to a family he does not know, and the ensuing consequences that an atmosphere of para-

noia and distrust eventually has on his life and personality.

But Wilson is a mystery that the film doesn't seem interested in. To say he is cold and expressionless is an understatement – he is an automaton, a repressive poster boy, who manages to make love to Angelina Jolie without a single flicker of feeling on his bespectacled face. Ever since his father's suicide when he was seven, he has had only occasional flickers of strong feeling (poetry, and a love affair with sweet, deaf Laura, played by Tammy Blanchard) but always reverts back to his corseted state. Had the film really been about Wilson, with real hints of passion and struggle, it could have been fantastic.

The atmosphere of paranoia is, not unlike Wilson's character, almost too faithfully portrayed, such that at times it is hard to know what on earth is going on. There are cameos everywhere by famous actors who all seem to look the same and speak in the same hushed tones. Somewhere between Alec Baldwin, Billy Crudup (who had the worst English accent I've ever heard), Robert De Niro, Michael Gambon, William Hurt and Joe Pesci I lost track of who was who, and who was on whose side. Exactly as intended, I'm sure, but rather confusing for the viewer.

And there are yet more distractions – often fascinating, but never coherent. Firstly there is the preposterously sexy Miss Jolie, who – as is quite clear from the cut of her jib and dresses – would never tolerate such a husband. Why was she cast as the downtrodden wife? And then there is the question of Edward Jr (the excellent Eddie Redmayne), who follows his father into the Skull and Bones and CIA with the certainty of a tragic flaw, and is responsible for the chaotic denouement. The Skull and Bones itself, with its naked wrestling, temples and ritual chants, feels like a cut-in from *The Da Vinci Code*. It is all oddly glamorous and literary for such a muted principal, and you don't know where to look. It is possible to have too many good ideas, Mr De Niro – next time follow Gordon Ramsay's advice: keep it simple and do it well.