

# Something's rotten...

By Joanne Laurier  
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The *Constant Gardener*, directed by Fernando Meirelles, screenplay by Jeffrey Caine, based on the novel by John le Carré

“Quayles always make reliable servicemen.” Thus Sir Bernard Pellegrin of the British Foreign Office describes the lineage of Justin Quayle, the “constant gardener” of the title. In fact, events will oblige Justin to break the long-term pattern of constancy and reliability—qualities demanded of a diplomat/bureaucrat serving the interests of British imperialism.

John le Carré’s novel of political intrigue, *The Constant Gardener*, has been adapted for the screen by Brazilian director Fernando Meirelles (*City of God*). The movie opens with the murder of Tessa Quayle (Rachel Weisz), the wife of Justin (Ralph Fiennes), a British diplomat in Kenya. As the latter begins looking into Tessa’s death, as well as the disappearance of her traveling companion and fellow activist, Dr. Arnold Bluhm (Hubert Koundé), he discovers that the two were on the verge of exposing a drug-testing program that killed some of the Africans it used as unwitting guinea pigs.

An “axis of evil” is in operation: Dypraxa, a drug for tuberculosis manufactured by KDH and distributed in Africa by the House of 3 B’s. The slogan of the “big pharma” company is “The World is Our Clinic.” Indeed, as the company races to have its treatment for the disease approved, it doctors the negative test results with the complicity of the British High Commission in Nairobi. Many of the drug’s recipients are already dying of the African scourge, AIDS, which means that any of Dypraxa’s injurious or fatal side effects can be concealed. “We’re not killing people who are not already dead,” callously declaims Sandy Woodrow (Danny Huston), the Head of Chancery.

Predicted to be the future global pandemic, tuberculosis represents megabucks with Dypraxa positioned to shoot into the realm of blockbuster drugs. In the interests of this potential jackpot, no obstacles, such as Tessa (“that rarest thing: a lawyer who believes in justice”) can be tolerated.

The drug’s inventor, Dr. Marcus Lorbeer (Pete Postlethwaite)—in self-imposed exile in a remote Sudanese desert—was one of the last persons to meet with Tessa before her death. He is in possession of a document that points a finger at the complicity of the British state in her death. When Justin succeeds by way of a pharma-watchdog group in Germany in locating Lorbeer, he obtains the goods, allowing him to blow the whistle, as much for Tessa as for the drug-trial’s numerous victims.

Lorbeer sums up one of the film’s central themes: “Pharmaceuticals are right up there with arms dealers.”

Meirelles has legitimately interpreted le Carré’s intricately plotted thriller. Kenya’s slums and villages and Sudan’s terrifying desert with its long-abandoned population are wrenching. Reportedly, actors Fiennes and Weisz were so shocked by Kenya’s poverty that they set up a trust fund to provide aid to the slum that features prominently in

the film. Weisz told an interviewer, “In the slum of Kabira we saw a level of poverty that I don’t think anyone had seen before. There’s a million people living in a very small space with no running water, no electricity, no sanitation, with a very high level of disease and HIV.”

Cast and crew contributed to *The Constant Gardener* Trust financing a bridge, schooling costs, road building and community groups in east Kenya. Producer Channing-Williams stated, “These are places where people are seriously, seriously poor and deprived, and water is at a dreadful premium. A lot of people were astounded by what they saw and wanted to do something about it.”

The actors bring this empathy to their performances. Fiennes and Weisz are affecting. Weisz’s brief interactions with Kenyan children (some of which were apparently not scripted) make an impression. British Foreign Office representatives are sufficiently cold-blooded and calculating, without losing all traces of humanity. The actors don’t hold back in their depiction of colonialist condescension, tipped towards revulsion, when dealing with the African poor.

When veteran British spy Donohue (Donald Sumpter) tells Justin that there is a contract out on him in Africa and coolly says, “Getting people out of countries is one of the few things we still do well,” one feels a blast from the old Empire. Maneuvers between Her Majesty’s cunning servants, the corrupt Kenyan officials and the cutthroat minions of big Pharma are convincingly enacted.

In the character of Sir Kenneth Curtiss, actor Gerard McSorley (last seen in *Omagh*, in a strikingly different role) embodies the nasty, sordid head of the drug distributor, 3 B’s. Pete Postlethwaite as Lorbeer, who opportunistically headed up the Dypraxa tests and then runs off to hide out in the depths of Sudan, delivers a strikingly complex performance. Existing as a walking encyclopedia of the pharmaceutical corporation’s dirty work, his days are numbered.

The relationship between the former colonial master and the corrupt representatives of the Kenyan state is brought out nicely in a scene where Justin is arrested by local police. “For a diplomat, you are not a very good liar,” says one of the latter; Justin responds, “I haven’t risen very high.”

In general, the performances of an outstanding group of British actors tend to rise above the limitations of the script, including an unnecessary number of clichés, and its direction.

In *The Constant Gardener*, the first meeting between Justin and Rachel stands out. Justin, having delivered a drab, abstract lecture on the “art” of British diplomacy, is verbally attacked by audience member Rachel: Why, she asks angrily, is Britain embroiled in Iraq—Vietnam the sequel? How does the lecturer justify the British government’s killing of thousands of people for oil and a photo-op on the White House lawn? Rachel then goes on to advocate a policy that lamely involves the United Nations. Nonetheless, her point about the war in Iraq hits home.

Without disclosing too much, mention should be made of the film’s

final sequence, a deviation from the novel. Although the scene perhaps tips the scale toward an overly satisfying emotional catharsis, there is something to be said for the blunt exposure of the Foreign Office's Pellegrin (Bill Nighy), a high-level official preparing for a new career with pharmaceutical giant KDH.

Having floated the lie that Justin committed suicide, Pellegrin goes on to describe the murdered diplomat as the quintessential representative of his profession—someone who is courteous, self-effacing and would not have inconvenienced Her Majesty's Government; in fact, says Pellegrin, nothing gave credit to his life so much as the way he ended it. The truth about Justin's fate at the hand of the British state, together with a condemnation of the deaths "from lives that are bought so cheaply" to benefit the "civilized world," dramatically closes the film.

The decision to film this novel is not insignificant. After four decades of writing fiction, le Carré is an insightful and talented novelist with intimate knowledge of the workings of the British state and the ruling elite as a whole. The publication of *The Constant Gardener* in 2001 was preceded by an article in the *Daily Telegraph*, entitled, "The Criminals of Capitalism," in which le Carré condemned "the conviction that, whatever profit-driven corporations do in the short term, they are ultimately motivated by ethical concerns, and their influence on the world is therefore beneficial, and so God help us all." Le Carré continued, "It seemed to me, as I began to cast around for a story to illustrate the example, that the pharmaceutical industry offered the most eloquent example."

Le Carré's book is based on documented cases, such as trials that the pharmaceutical giant Pfizer carried out in Nigeria during an epidemic of bacterial meningitis. The drug company administered to sick children an antibiotic that was banned for treatment of meningitis in the West. Despite its having been shown to cause damage to the joints and potentially to produce arthritis, Pfizer's tests were directed towards obtaining licensing for a wider use of the drug. Records indicate that the deaths of patients were kept anonymous and recorded only as numbers. Without follow-up treatment for the trials' survivors, there exists no official record of the long-term impact of the drug.

The filmmakers have made a conscious connection with the objective situation. They are not simply stumbling around in the dark like so many of their colleagues. There are certain objective landmarks in the film; definite social and material interests are represented.

Certain social types—corporate director, spy, diplomat, radical activist, political hit man—are delineated. Various issues arise, most essentially the role of transnational corporations, in the form of the pharmaceuticals, backed by the great powers. The ravaging of Africa by these forces and the desperate condition of its population are deeply felt. What type of society allows this to take place? What is the remedy?—are some of the questions that arise both logically and emotionally.

The film's remarkable cast labor with considerable diligence and conscientiousness, obviously affected by the extreme distress of the Kenyan population. It is within the core of the performances that one senses the growing global opposition to the Iraq war. A growing unease over the state of the world is to be welcomed.

As in the book, Justin Quayle is not a fully formed character and never really comes to life, but rather functions as something of a congealed plot device. His transition from formless, invisible civil servant (and "gardener") to an unstoppable—almost reckless—force

raging against the machine at times stretches credulity. The depiction of his relationship with Tessa—the vital *raison d'être* for his personality about-face—contains some of the film's weakest and least dramatic arrangements.

Why did Meirelles opt for such jittery camera-work and a fragmented approach? The director might consider it artistically fashionable, given that *City of God*, his previous film about Brazil's slums, was essentially made in this manner. Perhaps he is fascinated with new methods of narrative. He might argue that he is not interested in the social realism of the past and that only this oblique, indirect manner of telling a story is appropriate to our "new global reality" and new media, and so forth. Be that as it may, does this fragmentation help or hinder in relating the drama?

In the most obvious sense, it obstructs the viewer from experiencing, except fleetingly, the characters' inner world, as well as the film's more suggestive images.

One feels dissatisfied as well by the level of interaction with the Kenyans, who function more or less as background material. This reveals something about the director's political outlook—his sympathy for but essential distance from what he terms the "underdogs" of society. The same problems were present in his depiction of the slum dwellers in *City of God*.

While the director is not obliged to come up with a solution to the problems he chooses to focus on, one feels that Meirelles is made somewhat nervous by the seriousness of the concerns raised in the film—what is to be done with giant conglomerates that dominate the globe and wreak havoc on the world's population? How to proceed against their plundering? Unfortunately, the fragmentation and relentless chop-editing function primarily to deflect attention from these weighty matters.

The film raises issues for which there is no simple solution, but distracting the audience with cinematic pyrotechnics doesn't help. It would be better, for example, to explain that this reality is difficult, that there are no quick fixes, or that a handful of outraged activists with slogans is not enough to make things right.

*The Constant Gardener* disturbs, lingers in the mind, for its images of Africa, images of corporate thuggery, images of well-meaning people drowning in their own self-deception (Woodrow), for its inner look at the machinations of imperialism with its mendacious servants, and so forth. Society is in deep crisis, and cinema is called on to continuously address this fact.

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