

Arts & Letters

FILM

[The In-Laws]

Married to the CIA

By Steve Sailer

MICHAEL DOUGLAS REPLACES Peter Falk and Albert Brooks takes over for Alan Arkin in "The In-Laws," a loose remake of the 1979 semi-classic comedy.

The first hour is one of the most consistently funny so far in 2003, although that's not saying too much during this fallow year for screen comedies. It doesn't deliver many huge laughs, but the chuckles come almost as fast as in a quality TV sit-com (not that there are as many of those as there were five years ago, either). The yuks aren't terribly novel or insightful, but quantity can be a form of quality.

Sadly, the new film abruptly runs out of jokes with a half hour to go. In contrast, the original built slowly to some memorable comic climaxes.

If you want to sell your screenplay, it's smart to frontload your best material like this, since busy studio executives can hardly be expected to read scripts all the way through. Audiences, however, tend to judge movies more by how they feel as they walk out of the theater, so this bodes poorly for the latest version's word-of-mouth.

Surprisingly, you can watch the two films back to back without getting bored because the renditions share almost nothing besides their general set-up. Arkin/Brooks is a medical professional whose daughter is marrying the son of

Falk/Douglas, who is either a top American secret agent or a con man or both. The extroverted spy lures the staid doctor into a crazed espionage adventure that threatens the big wedding.

It's really more of a spy spoof, but it's being advertised as a bridal flick because Americans love comedies with "wedding" in the title. Our culture has become so casual that nuptials provide one of the few remaining formal occasions that can make indignities and embarrassments so much funnier.

The new screenwriters Nat Mauldin and Ed Solomon chose to use almost no jokes from the original script by the distinguished funnyman Andrew Bergman (of "Blazing Saddles," "Fletch," and "The Freshman" fame). Bergman's script was so finely tuned to the personas of the lovable Falk and the volatile Arkin that almost none of the bits of business were transferable to the alpha-male Douglas and the neurotic Brooks.

"In-Laws" cultists can still crack each other up with just the three words Falk shouts at Arkin: "Serpentine, Shelly, serpentine!" But I couldn't explain why that's so funny in less time than it would take you to watch the movie. The best comedy defies summarization because the humor builds upon on all that went before.

Bergman wrote the spy role as an honesty-challenged variation on Falk's famous Lt. Columbo, the bumbling but resourceful everyman. In contrast, Michael Douglas radiates privilege and success, so Mauldin and Solomon made his character a super-competent CIA operative who enjoys his job as much as Donald Trump loves his. He's not as intriguing as Falk's character, but he fits Douglas better.

The other role wasn't fleshed out much beyond a blunt-spoken masculinity made mildly famous by Arkin's per-

fect comic timing, but Albert Brooks gave the 2003 writers a richer, quirkier target.

Brooks (whose real name is, and I'm not making this up, "Albert Einstein") has enjoyed a long career as a comic, actor, writer, and director, with 1991's "Defending Your Life" being perhaps the highlight. He might well have become a huge star if Woody Allen hadn't beaten him to the Jewish worrywart persona. What's distinctive about Brooks' shtick is his patented slow burn, but that would have worked better in the more deliberately paced 1979 movie.

Together, Douglas and Brooks generate decent screen chemistry, although they aren't in the class of their predecessors.

Other differences between the 1979 and 2003 films illustrate changes in American culture. For example, the spy now has a beautiful young sidekick so we can watch her beat up the other characters. Back in 1979, few imagined that scenes of pretty girls hurting people would ever appeal to more than a limited (indeed, fetishistic) audience, but they now seem to be an indispensable part of summer multiplex movies.

The bad guy in the first movie was General Garcia, the lunatic dictator of a banana republic. These days, fortunately, there aren't that many old-line *generalissimos* left in power. Plus, the only thing the new Hollywood dreads more than being insensitive to Hispanics is starring them in movies. (Witness the striking lack of Latinos in the otherwise super-multiethnic "Matrix Reloaded"). So, the updated villain is a crime boss from—you guessed it—the one nation we're perfectly free to laugh at nowadays: France.

Arkin played a rich dentist, but Brooks is a podiatrist, perhaps because there aren't many wealthy dentists left. By

selflessly promoting fluoride toothpaste, America's dentists have greatly reduced the number of cavities that provided their economic bread and butter. A noble endeavor. ■

Rated PG-13 for suggestive humor, language, some drug references, and action violence.
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BOOKS

[*The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, Fareed Zakaria, W.W. Norton & Company, 256 pages]

Guarding Liberty from Democracy

By Roger Scruton

ANCIENT WRITERS on political themes would seldom recommend a purely democratic constitution on the grounds that, unless checked by powerful countervailing forces, democracy could at any moment degenerate into mob rule. The argument was refined by later thinkers, and notably in the 19th century by Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill, both of whom warned against the "tyranny of the majority." Unless the constitution protects the rights and freedoms of individuals and minorities, they argued, democratic choice could threaten anyone at any time—as it did in Hitler's Germany. Put another way, the argument tells us that there is nothing inherently liberal in popular choice and that individual freedom might be better protected under an aristocracy than when exposed to the whims of democratic resentment. Indeed, that is what Edmund Burke thought and what he showed to be the case in his great study of the French Revolution.

Although the argument is familiar—and indeed no more than plain common sense—it is constantly forgotten by modern people, who seize on popular choice as the one criterion of legitimacy, for fear of otherwise endorsing the rule of elites and offending the official doctrine of human equality.

In this well-argued and far-ranging survey, *Newsweek International* editor Fareed Zakaria shows the damage that is being done by this un-nuanced pursuit of the democratic idea and argues once again for a society in which elites are accorded their proper place and esteemed for what they are—the true guardians of individual freedom and the ones who have the greatest stake in maintaining law, order, and accountability in the public realm. His argument is particularly pertinent now, when allied forces are attempting to bring freedom to Iraq by imposing democratic procedures on its people. As Zakaria points out, democracy could as well lead to an elected dictatorship of mullahs as to a modern civil society. For democracy without the rule of law is mob rule, and the rule of law is not built by democratic means.

Elected dictatorships, which extinguish opposition, destroy the political process too. It is only where people are free to dissent that genuine democratic choice is possible. Hence liberty should come higher than democracy in the wish list of our politicians. You can have liberty without democracy, but not democ-

gence of a socially mobile middle class. That is why the transition to democracy is successful in countries with a per capita GDP of \$3,000 to \$6,000 but not in countries where it is significantly less.

The argument here is pertinent and fascinating. As Zakaria makes clear, there is all the difference in the world between a country where this relatively high GDP is achieved by the enterprise of the citizens and a country where it comes simply from selling off some natural resource like oil. The high GDP of Saudi Arabia is a kind of political illusion since it does nothing to indicate the emergence of a resourceful middle class or the demand for freedom, law, and citizenship that such a class will inevitably make. Thanks to oil, Saudi Arabia exists in a state of feudal hypostasis, even though it can treat its citizens—who are not true citizens but subjects—to a middle-class lifestyle.

As it proceeds, Zakaria's argument turns increasingly towards the condition of America and the damage that untrammelled democratization is doing, as he sees it, to American social and political institutions. Here he brings home a truth that was already very much in the minds of the Founding Fathers, influenced as they were by Montesquieu's conception of the separation of powers. Democracy, he argues, is intrinsically hostile to elites, but it also requires them. For no democracy can survive without a rule of law, without offices and dignities that refuse to be swayed by popular pas-

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racy without liberty: such is the lesson of European history. Before imposing democratic regimes, therefore, we should ensure that civil liberty is properly entrenched in a rule of law, a rotation of offices, and the freedom to dissent. These institutions tend to arise naturally, Zakaria argues, with the emer-

sions, without the kind of public servants whose social position is sufficiently secure that they can see service as its own reward. In short, democracies need to create their own form of aristocracy.

This the Americans had done, Tocqueville thought, through the dignities bestowed on the judiciary and through