

film

review

Cruise in control but showing hint of darkness

FILM TITLE

RUNNING TIME: 117 MINS

★★★★☆

There are basically two kinds of Tom Cruise performances, and both can look pretty similar on the surface. Each likes sunglasses, going fast and smiling big.

He never exactly loosens up or slows down — the most unfathomable thing of all in Cruise's world. But most of Cruise's best and most interesting performances ("Magnolia," "Jerry Maguire," "Collateral," "Eyes Wide Shut") have allowed some chink in the well-tanned armour, some hint of darkness underneath the rakish boy scout, some hollowness in the soul of America's ageless action-movie avatar.

Cruise's latest is the smart, zippy "American Made," a movie that plays very much like your type-A Tom Cruise movie before it yanks the rug out from beneath you and reveals the B-movie Cruise we've been missing. It's a fiendishly perfect vehicle for Cruise that returns him to the cockpit, 31 years after "Top Gun," and it simultaneously reminds us of his preternaturally winning movie-star charisma while subtly deconstructing it.

Doug Liman, the film's director, has shown a rare knack for intelligently packaging A-list personas in kinetic kaleidoscopes. He did it in "Mr. & Mrs. Smith" with Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, in "Bourne Identity" with Matt Damon and in his last film with Cruise, "Edge of Tomorrow," the time-warped science fiction that proved a movie maxim: You just can't kill Tom Cruise.

In "American Made," a loosely true tale set in the late '70s and early '80s, Cruise plays Barry Seal, a TWA pilot whose on-the-side smuggling of



This image released by Universal Pictures shows Tom Cruise as Barry Seal in a scene from, "American Made."

DAVID JAMES/
UNIVERSAL PICTURES VIA AP



This image released by Universal Pictures shows Tom Cruise, left, and Sarah Wright Olsen in a scene from, "American Made."

Cuban cigars brings him into the orbit of the CIA. An officer named Shafer (Domhnall Gleeson) turns up, and offers him a job taking surveillance photos and making government payoffs to the likes of Panama's Manuel Noriega in Central America. "We're building nations down there," says Shafer, giddy.

Seal, eyeing his own plane and eager to permanently switch off "auto-pilot," jumps at the chance and doesn't stop giggling at his good luck. "I do tend to leap before I look," he says in a video diary that plays occasionally through the film. "Maybe I should have asked a few more questions."

Blithely, even charmingly ignorant of the dangerous and ethically questionable terrain he's entering, Seal is soon cheerfully smuggling enormous amounts of cocaine back to Arkansas

for Pablo Escobar's Medellin Cartel. On both sides of the law, things escalate quickly. Seal and his family (Sarah Wright Olsen plays his wife), can't spend their money fast enough. They run out of closet space and backyard holes for all the cash coming in.

The CIA's missions grow more audacious, too. Seal becomes the government's clandestine exporter of AK-47s to the Nicaraguan Contras, who in turn are eventually flown back to Seal's Arkansas base for military training. Seal greets them all with an easygoing grin: "Hola, amigos!"

It's an increasingly absurd circle of drugs, guns and money, all ostensibly for the fight against "enemies of democracy." The ironies mount, topping out with Nancy Reagan's war-on-drugs plea to "say no" while her husband's secret

efforts to arm militants is fueling one of the most powerful drug cartels in the world.

Like a handful of recent movies such as "War Dogs" and "War Machine," "American Made" is a farce of American international ambition run amok. Here are the comical on-the-ground results of ill-considered policies from all the way up the command chain. Presidents, beginning with Jimmy Carter and running up to Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton make cameos throughout "American Made."

It's both a tribute to and a joke on American opportunism that the cavalier decisions of politicians can so easily and so overwhelming benefit (up to a point) a thrill-seeking pilot who can't say no. The crescendo comes with Seal, fleeing the DEA, crash lands in a suburb and escapes on a kid's bike, all the while covered in a white powder of coke. Finally, a fresh and unfamiliar method of escape for Cruise.

"American Made," written by Gary Spinelli, has glossed up the story, of course. Seal's life wasn't nearly so shiny as it is as played by Cruise. But then again, whose is?

"American Made," a Universal Pictures release, is rated R by the Motion Picture Association of America for "language throughout and some sexuality/nudity."

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Associated Press