

DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER

Directed by Guy Hamilton
Produced by Harry Saltzman and Albert R. Broccoli
Distributed by United Artists
Released in 1971

Always looking for a safe bet, as all good businessmen should do, Hollywood executives love sequels. Suits with no artistic pretensions are more than happy to continue cranking out sequels to appease the money men in New York and the restless shareholders keen to seize upon the next mega-merger. Accordingly, many critics refuse to take sequels seriously. They launch into tiring comparisons to the original film. What they always fail to see is that an individual film, no matter how many Roman numerals are attached to it, is an entity unto itself, and can be judged accordingly. While certain allowances have to be made for character development addressed in previous films, a sequel rises or falls on its own.

Once in a while a franchise really takes flight, where instead of the studio manufacturing a hit, the public does it for them. And the critics join the fun. This happened with the James Bond series, launched in 1962. The character of secret agent 007 became inexorably linked with the dashing Scotsman Sean Connery. For a variety of reasons, some valid, when he took a hiatus from the series, leaving the Bond producers with an untested Australian named George Lazenby, critics voiced apathetic disapproval. When Connery returned in 1971, starring in *Diamonds Are Forever*, paens were heralded throughout the press. The film was little seen as an entity unto itself (even though the producers took pains to distance it from the emotional malestrom that was *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*). Connery was not the same as he had been in the mid-'60s. Gone was the vigor and bitter zest beloved in films previous; the new Connery was a listless talker—funny, but unthreatening. The critics never gave the film a fair shake. A reassessment is due.

In the movie, James Bond is ordered to uncover a diamond smuggling ring that could prove devastating to the United Kingdom's financial interests in South Africa. The trail leads to the Netherlands, and then the United States. Posing as a smuggler, he enters into an alliance with jaded love machine Tiffany Case. Before long, recurring super-fiend Ernst Stavro Blofeld is discovered hoarding the diamonds to complete a space-based weapon system to hold the earth ransom. No trouble—Bond conquers all.

The storyline is a thicket of twisted brush, and all we've got is a dull machete. The character of Plenty O'Toole is a waste. As a vapid sex-and-money-hungry floosy, she contributes nothing but a few cheap jokes and, while needlessly serving as a sacrificial lamb, derails the plot and leaves the audience scratching its collective head. Blofeld demonstrates none of the menace necessary to accept his absurd plan without the greatest suspension of disbelief. The validity of a smuggling payoff is questioned, then forgotten. Bond retrieves the diamonds from the body of a corpse, which is never explained. The killers, Wint and Kidd, infiltrate the pipeline, and are welcomed by a smuggler who never met them before. The list of contradictions and befuddled plot twists is hopelessly long.

The character of Tiffany Case, initially brassy and world-weary, soon degenerates into a hopeless, burdensome appendage to a serpentine plot. Felix Leiter, Bond's erstwhile heroic ally, is a bumbling snoop, and the villain dresses in drag. But is the film an unsalvageable mess?

It is a disappointment, and severely flawed. Some good parts, like the tension preceding the elevator fight, the living cremation, and the globe-trotting opening sequence are standouts unmatched in the flaccid second half of the film. The double-reveal of Willard Whyte is satisfying, as is the suspense just prior to the final showdown with killers Wint and Kidd. But it's still incomprehensible, poorly designed, perfunctorily edited. The saving grace of *Diamonds Are Forever* is atmosphere.

Once Bond sets down in the scorched lands of Nevada, environment is mood. If one could only take the film seriously, the desert would serve in rich contrapuntal metaphors. The sands, sagebrush, and glaring sun of the desert are beautiful, but lonely and imposing. When Bond is escorted to Slumber Funeral Home by three thugs, removed from the safe and ordered environs of the local international airport, and conveyed to a depopulated wasteland, we know he is entering a dangerous realm. The funeral home is situated where few would find its location advantageous. It is far away from oversight and accountability, Slumber's nefarious deeds cloaked in acceptability, dark secrets laid to rest with the hallowed dead, in memoriam.

Later in the film, Bond is left for dead, interred in a pipeline twelve feet under. Here again, the desert is imposing, dangerous. Later, though, the opulent seclusion of house arrest amidst a desert retreat has left Willard Whyte in good health; the desert offers sanctuary to men burdened by the weight of civilization.

Civilization, if the word is applicable, is represented in the film by Las Vegas, that gaudy, disposable wonderland for pimps, bookies, and Mafia hirelings. Bond stands apart, his quiet confidence a cool contrast to the garrulous tourists and circumspect pit bosses. He is in his element, demolishing all comers and putting the establishment on notice during a game of craps, but his tuxedo and faint air of British infallibility render him unable to work inconspicuously, as when Burt Saxby eyes him casing Shady Tree's dressing room. Las Vegas is either a blight upon the serene and undisturbed desert or the culminating misery and chaos of barren valleys vexed by the specter of death. Either way, Vegas is a dry oasis.

The musical score for *Diamonds Are Forever* goes a long way toward establishing in the viewer's mind the suspicion that somewhere in the spirit of the film lay an impressionistic fantasy obliterated by time constraints. Flute and harp take the foreground in a deconstructed orchestral milieu composed and arranged by John Barry. His theme for the killers Wint and Kidd, wistful and sad, is animated by a perpetual baseline that nicely matches their systematic liquidations.

It's not a very remarkable film, and in the context of its history, a film that disappoints the expectations of the first-time viewer. But since nobody takes it seriously, the bewildered groans it elicits are short-lived. Indeed, it is fun to watch, and can be screened time and again, each occasion revealing one more reason for its failure. With a great title and a lot of surprises in store, it's an overpriced cinematic spirit that goes down smoothly.