MOVIES

'English Patient' might be year's best



Imagine Tom Cruise buying the rights to Michael Ondantje's

hands, "The English Patient"

and betrayal around the Second World War.
Fortunately, "The English Patient' that's already topping crities' best-of-year lists is handled with such profound beauty and intelligence that it's difficult to imagine anyone doing it better.
It opens with dark, delicate brush strokes that dissolve into the shadowy, wind-swept sands of the desert. The camera heads higher, just above the ceckpit of a single prop plane. Shells and matchine gunfire stripe through

it and, as the screen fades to white, the plane bursts into flames.
The surviving pilot (Ralph Fiennes), burned beyond recognition and barely able to breathe, ends up in an Allied army hospital, known only as "The English Patient' because his memory is supposedly lost, Years later, in the ruins or an Italian monastery, a French-Canadian nurse (duliette Banoche) pieces getter his tragic error, enders, so chindler's List" and "Quiz Show," plays the pilot, Count

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Almasy, shown in flashback as a linguist and explorer in the late 1930s whose maps of the Egyptian desert prove a hot commodity when war finally breaks out. He meets Katharine (Hristin Scott Thomas), a married woman who helps fund the expedition, and soon they are in a passion-ate romance.

Picture this, Harlequin fans: Alone together in his room. The red bail of the Egyptian sunset sinks behind ancient Cairo temples, casting a pink glow of passion over the lovers. They plunge into an all-consuming embras he tears the dress from her chest, sinks to his knees and begins to feast on her expectant flesh.

Normally I'd cringe at a love

begins to feast on her expectant flesh. Normally I'd cringe at a love scene like this, but writer/director Anthony Minghella ("Truly Mally Deeply") handles the whole affair with such bloody good taste that it's impossible to knock it.

The movie nimbly jumps between this romance and the unique bond Almany forms with his nurse, a woman who has lost

virtually everyone close to her.
She begins to fall in love with a young Sikh bomb expert (Naveen Andrews) who has learned to overlook in individuals his strong hatred of oppressive English Imperiolism.

Almasy's memory is further forced when another Canadian (Willem Dafeo), his hands covered mysteriously by gloves, enters the picture. His own painful story is yet another emotionally draining scene in a movie that is liable to stir even the most detached filmgoor.

Aside from delivering such an emotional wallop, "The English Patient" is full of unique moments and amazing sequences. The nurse and her new lover enter the monastery's temple at night and through a series of ropes and pulleys, she's able to view the breathtuking frescoes face to face.

Should you like to look deeper, you'll find "The English Patient" rich in unifying symbols. The sun, water, fire, even the copy of Herodotus that the man carries turn up again and again to link

understand how it all strings together.

If the movie falters anywhere together, it's when these symbols get in the way of creating three-dimensional characters. Almosy is more or less defined as a deep person by his sole possession: a book of philosophy crammed with scraps of paper. You don't know that much about him as an actual person, before or after his injuries.

But since when has it been a sin to make an audience work for

But since when has it been a sin to make an audience work for its pleasures? On so many levels "The English Patient" is a rich, satisfying movie experience that will likely be awarded the gold statuette at Oscar time. And for once it just might deserve it.

John Monaghan welcomes your calls and comments. You can lis-ten to him on Dave Dison's Radio Show AM 1270, 8 p.m. to mid-night Saturdays. To leave John a voice mail message, dial (313) 953-2017 an a touch-tone phone, mailbox 1866.



Fienne and Kristen Thomas star in Minghella's English Patient.



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