

'The Last Castle' pits Redford against a new foe

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A military prison flick pitting Robert Redford against James Gandolfini for all rights should make for a great action drama. It's like Jeremiah Johnson versus Tony Soprano, and that has to be good — right?

Well, it's OK stuff in *The Last Castle*, a movie that explores the essence of leadership but fails to provide enough suspense or urgency to make it a true thriller. Redford plays three-year General Irwin, a modern-day Patton who was court-martialed and sent to a maximum security military prison called The Castle. Gandolfini is the tight-lipped warden, Colonel Winter, an officer who collects war artifacts yet never set foot on the battlefield.

An off-handed remark Irwin makes about the colonel's collection immediately creates tension between the two men, lead-

ing to a psychological chess game that tests their combat skills and military savvy. The battlefield here is the prison, quite authentic by the way since the movie was filmed at the Tennessee State Penitentiary which operated from 1898 to 1992. And it's the prisoners of course who become the pawns, sometimes for sacrifice.

Director Rod Lurie (*The Contender*) is a 1984 graduate of West Point, so he knows a thing or two about the conduct of officers. In *The Last Castle*, he relies on characters rather than plot twists to carry this movie. We expect a personality clash between the two officers, and that's exactly what we get. We expect the general to quickly gain the other prisoners' loyalty and for the jealous warden to react in a petty way — and that happens too.

I liked Redford's character. General Irwin appears to act in just cause when he convinces

the other inmates to join him in a plot against the colonel. Except he uses his new army like chess pieces and it leads you to wonder whose war is he really fighting.

Gandolfini, who admits he had reservations about playing

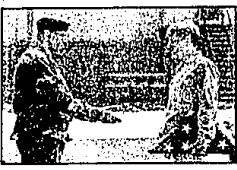
a military officer, deftly allows you to feel his self-consciousness by his heaving breathing and how he fidgets with his uniform. But the character itself resembles a cardboard figure that has 'bad guy' written across the chest, making for an obvious

target.

The movie clips along at a nice pace, and look for a nice performance by Mark Ruffalo (*You Can Count on Me*) as an inmate who tries to play both sides of the fence. A few more twists and this could have been

a four-star General.

Instead we'll give *The Last Castle* three medals of honor and a pair of sunglasses for the Sundance Kid, who still remains one of the best actors on the big screen.



Opening tomorrow:
The drama *'The Last Castle'* stars (left to right) James Gandolfini and Robert Redford battling it out on prison grounds.

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