

Tom, Thanks for The Terminal

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THE TERMINAL (2004)

Directed by Steven Spielberg

Written by Sacha Gervasi & Jeff Nathanson

Starring Stanley Tucci, Catherine Zeta-Jones, & Tom Hanks as Viktor Navorski

This whole life is a game of waiting, and deciding when you shouldn't have to wait any longer. Sometimes you have no choice but to leave an outcome to the hands of fate. My 2019 resolution was to submit my book for publishing consideration, and on December 30th, I made good on that goal. I wasted two envelopes trying to get my printing of the address just *so*, and once I'd slipped it into a mailbox, the result of my efforts was literally out of my hands. Best case scenario, I'll have to wait six months for a response (if one comes at all), and I've found the suspense will tour me through a diverse array of emotions. So far, these have included obsession, despondence, regret, and occasionally rational zen. But the wait is inevitable, and if I try, I can learn to love it.

I saw a lot of good movies over the holidays, but didn't make time for a TH flick until this week, when my fiance and I decided to dive back in. I searched "Tom Hanks" on Netflix, she casually said, "I've never seen The Terminal," and we were watching it half a second later. Let's consider the title of this film as it relates to the theme of *waiting*. Quite literally, a terminal is a designated zone for waiting (waiting for one's flight, waiting to go home, etc.) Abstractly, to describe something as *terminal* means it's transitioning (from one airport to the next, or from one life to the next). 2004's The Terminal spends 98% of its runtime in a setting we most associate with waiting, and that's just what the movie's about.

Viktor Navorski is a pleasure traveller, New York City-bound from his Russia-adjacent homeland of Krakozhia. While en route, a civil war ensues, rendering his passport invalid and precluding him from entry into the United States. So, he has to wait. Catherine Zeta-Jones plays Amelia, a JFK-frequenting flight attendant who's been promised eventual commitment from the married man with whom she's involved. So, she has to wait. Diego Luna is Enrique, who's been distantly loving Zoe Saldana's Delores, the resident form-stamper stationed next to the take-a-number dispenser. So, they both have to wait. Stanley Tucci is Frank Dixon, an airport security supervisor who's finally within reach of the executive position he's long coveted. Frank feels he's waited too long to allow a crack in the system to derail his trajectory, and so, he resorts to treating Viktor rather inhumanely. This leads to the film's other main theme: some rules are not worth following.

We're often so hung up on protocol and standardization that we forget to treat others with the sensitivity we expect for ourselves. How often have you groaned, at airport security, about having to dispose of your apparently threatening body wash, only to realize later they completely over-looked the dagger-like nail file in your carry-on? The rules are arbitrary and they're impossible to perfectly anticipate, which is why coming from a place of different customs is strenuous and disadvantageous. Viktor never means any disrespect, and he's done nothing wrong, but his foreignness causes him alienation. Therein, The Terminal has further cultural relevance in 2020, because it features a refugee seeking asylum, unjustly being detained by a government organization. Not so far-fetched, as it turns out.

Interestingly, a different narrative of bureaucratic national security would have been top of mind at the time of The Terminal's release. It had only been a short time since 9/11 and air travel had recently become much more intensely secure. For that reason, it's possible Frank's behaviour toward Viktor could have been construed as more complex, and a patriotic commitment to order. Nowadays, his actions are irredeemable and it's somewhat unsatisfying when no retribution ultimately befalls him. Another detail that doesn't age particularly well is a poster shown outside the airport's technology vendor, which reads "Introducing the camera phone." But this happens with any movie as commercial as this, and it can be enriching to consume a piece of art with the context of a different era than was intended. It's almost as if waiting can make something better.

Probably because of the Spielberg of it all, this film can boast a strong supporting cast. But it is upheld by the shoulders of Mr. Hanks, who affects a thick Eastern European accent (which is convincing, if not regionally specific), and delivers an effective physical performance, conveying sincere fish-out-of-water energy with his body language. The story itself is warm and forgivably quaint, but it is occasionally difficult not to wonder why one of the largest airports in the world isn't capable of better diplomatic communications with a man who (according to

the script) speaks some dialect of Russian. Can't any of Viktor's new American friends get him a translator? Or, for that matter, a lawyer?

Though something of a far-fetched yarn, *The Terminal* is conscious of its intention from the beginning and that's part of what makes it a good movie. It has clear follow-through in servicing both themes of waiting, and the fallibility of rules. Where these roads converge is in the teaching that waiting for something because you think you're supposed to is no way to get what you want. We know this, it's why we make resolutions, it's why we chase our dreams. I finished the first draft of my book well over a year ago, and then I spent months pouring over it, viciously scrutinizing every word in pursuit of impossible perfection. When I realized I'd given the project all I had to give, it sat on my desk for a long time before I could push myself to place it in the hands of fate. I was afraid of the waiting as much as the thing I'd be waiting for. But I might as well learn to love the waiting, because I'm in it now, and I can't interfere. Those are the rules; and some rules *are* worth following.

Thx!