

CHANGELING _____ (9.5/10)

Eternal vigilance: price of liberty... and identity

Written by J. Michael Straczynski

Directed by Clint Eastwood

Angelina Jolie ... Christine Collins
Gattlin Griffith ... Walter Collins
John Malkovich ... Rev. Gustav A. Briegleb
Colm Feore ... Chief James E. Davis
Michael Kelly ... Detective Lester Ybarra
Jeffrey Donovan ... Capt. J.J. Jones
Jason Butler Harner ... Gordon Northcott
Amy Ryan ... Carol Dexter

Christine Collins: He's not my son.

Capt. J.J. Jones: Mrs. Collins...

Christine Collins: No, I don't know why he's saying that he is, but he's not Walter and there's been a mistake.

Capt. J.J. Jones: I thought we agreed to give him time to adjust.

Christine Collins: He's three inches shorter; I measured him on the chart.

Capt. J.J. Jones: Well, maybe your measurements are off. Look, I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation for all of this.

Christine Collins: He's circumcised and Walter isn't.

Capt. J.J. Jones: Mrs. Collins, your son was missing for five months, for at least part of that time in the company of an unidentified drifter. Who knows what such a disturbed individual might have done. He could have had him circumcised. He could have...

Christine Collins: ...made him shorter?

You have to give Eastwood mountains of credit for recreating Los Angeles in the late 1920s and early 1930s, down to the stitch patterns on women's hatwear, operation of central telephone switchboard rooms, and the electric street cars trolleys (later destroyed courtesy of General Motors and other transportation cartel interests). I commented to my coviewer, "So this is how so many people were able to live in the city and not need cars." [1]

Changeling is an archetypal story about abuse of the police power and its damaging effects on a real working woman Christine Collins (Angelina Jolie, in her best role yet). Unlike so many movies with a factual history— which list the phrase "based on a true story" in their credit sequence—Clint Eastwood's starkly themed movie states clearly this film is "a true story." No pussyfootin' around for Clint... nor for coproducers Brian Grazer and Ron Howard.

From the gitgo, we're transported to a middle-class neighborhood in Los Angeles, 1928. How the filmmakers manage to produce such believable sets complete with automobiles of the time and people riding in genuine streetcars... is a miraculous mystery. But thank you so much. I see very few movies in which the settings or the special effects are worth the price of admission on their own. Interestingly, another Ron Howard movie, Angels and Demons, which I reviewed last week, is one of them.

We efficiently learn that Christine is an exceptionally attractive, well-dressed single mother of the 20s; she holds a supervisory position at the Pacific Telegraph and Telephone Company generally filled by men. She's good at her work, and she works diligently, yet tenderly, to raise her nine-year-old boy, Walter. One day, the boy tells her, as she picks him up from school, that he was in a fight: "The other boy said you're not a fit mother, because you can't hold on to a man." She cleverly and concretely suggests that unlike Walter, who takes responsibility for his actions, ol' Pop had a problem manning up in that area.

She also supports Walter with the standard "don't be the one to start a fight, but sure be the one to finish it" admonishment. A phrase that comes back to give her courage at a key moment later on.

The true story of Walter and Christine Collins is also related to the apprehension and trial of a serial killer, Gordon Northcott, who lived near Los Angeles and preyed on young boys. Whether Walter was one of Northcott's victims is a matter of debate, but on March 10, 1928— sometime during a day when his mother had been called reluctantly and unexpectedly to work and had had to leave him unattended—he disappears. Apparently, unlike our current missing-children situation, the vanishing of Walter caused a nationwide child-hunt, with the LA Police Department (supposedly) investigating leads unsuccessfully for months.

Something I was not aware of, the LAPD of the mid-Prohibition era functioned as a glittering collection of death-dealing thugs who were far more murderous and dangerous to the average citizen than any criminal gang. One popular social reformer, Reverend Gustav A. Briegleb (John Malkovich), made the palpable corruption of this toxic department his personal mission to clean up. The venomously sleazy chief of police, James Davis (Colm Feore), and his men were embarrassed by the crime rate in the city—not to mention their active role in it. They were getting nowhere on the Collins disappearance.

Five months later, from DeKalb, Illinois, a boy surfaces claiming to be the missing son. A reunion is scheduled by the LAPD for public relations reasons, but the PR objectives are threatened when Christine exclaims "that's not my son." Clearly it is not, but she agrees to the appeals of Captain J.J. Jones (Jeffrey Donovan) to take the boy home for a while to avoid a deep public humiliation for the police. She later decides enough is enough, and reasserts—with dental records, school teacher affidavits, the boy's height, the fact he is circumcised, and other ironclad evidence—that this new boy is an impostor. And the LAPD needs to get on with the search for her son.

Well, all hell breaks loose. We find out the lengths to which men who live by arbitrary power and deceit will go when they are challenged... particularly by a self-assertive woman in the 1920s who has no man, and threatens to blow up their whole sordid cabal of machismo.

Let's leave it at that insofar as conveying details of the storyline. Suffice it to state that the LA police-state-in-a-can violates Christine's civil liberties in ways horrifyingly parallel to how, say, the United States government and the CIA very routinely might—under the new Obama rules of "precrime" detention—disappear your teenage daughter to a rape camp in anticipation that she will someday text anti-American profanity to her Muslim girlfriend. Please watch V for Vendetta.

Changeling is about one of the more positively heroic women (and men, primarily in the person of Reverend Briegleb) of the 20th century... as well as about some of the most despicable human creatures inhabiting what was supposedly, qua free country, inhospitable to petty tyrants in political subdivisions. It points out in a microcosm that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty: that if the people do not constantly watch what is happening in their local government (and if responsible civic leaders do not put in the "sacrifice" of their valuable time to contend with the sinister-powerful who wait like Dracula for the slightest dimming of the light), the most egregious crimes against humanity will occur. Ever more severe for happening thru "legitimate" government offices.

Before leaving with a 9.5 recommendation, this movie is sooo important for what it says about standing up for the obvious truth and the degree to which the powerful will try to turn the obvious truth on its ear through subterfuge, misdirection, all the logical fallacies, blatant lying, and outright brute force. The film emphasizes that the liar and the brute are two sides of the same degenerative coin and are only defeated through truth and constant defense of the nonaggression principle.

Let's make a parallel to national-government criminal behavior evident in in major government crimes and coverups such as the assassination of JFK, the Oklahoma City bombings, Waco and Ruby Ridge, Flight KAL 007, the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, and the 9/11 Attacks (etc., etc., etc.). In every one of these crimes, the evidence of internal government-agency planning and causation is as overwhelming as the evidence that the boy from DeKalb, Illinois, was not Walter Collins. We're dealing with a different level of government, but the principle is the same: a) the powerful will lie and aggress to such a degree that it seems incomprehensible to normal people, and b) those seeking justice have the truth on their side and—if they, if we, are to succeed—must be prepared to overcome the most abominable behavior imaginable from those in political authority. "Sometimes, you gotta get mean."—Clint E.

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[1] I did read one skeptic of the story, but the details that have come to light, from numbers of different sources, prove that GM and other cooperating members of the transportation cartel initiated a program to buy and destroy city rail transportation systems across the country... so they could force more Americans into their automobiles.

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Changeling | LA Police Department Crimes | City Corruption | Christine Collins