



Conclave

120 min

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Is there a British actor at work more diverse than Ralph Fiennes? He can dial things right down in quieter dramas (*The Dig*), brings a spry verve to comedic roles (*The Grand Budapest Hotel*), and goes magnificently big when the assignment requires (*A Bigger Splash*, *In Bruges*). He's always precisely as good as the material allows him to be. Sometimes better. Peter Straughan's eloquent adaptation of Robert Harris's 2016 Papal thriller allows him to be very good indeed. He's Cardinal Lawrence, a Vatican functionary charged with overseeing the election of a new Pope when the ailing Pontiff, a much-loved and liberal-minded Holy Father, heads for the Pearly Gates. Rounds of voting – and scheming – await before a new pope is chosen and white smoke comes out of the Vatican chimney. And Fiennes is immaculate. His cardinal carries himself with the burdened obeisance of a man who knows that when he finally gets to heaven, he'll probably be put in charge of the filing. A fellow cardinal dismisses him as 'less a shepherd than a manager.' The actor's reaction is perfect: the half-wince of a man who knows, deep down, that he's probably right. Directed with real élan by Edward Berger – going two-for-two on literary adaptations after his take on *All Quiet on the Western Front* – *Conclave* is a film for the 'they don't make 'em like they used to' brigade. Like a '70s conspiracy thriller, its schemes and twists play out *sotto voce*: senior clergymen exchange scuttlebutt between vapes (there's a lot of vaping in the Vatican) and the Vatican canteen echoes with horse trading. The stakes are high: will the Holy See fall under the control of another liberal, like Stanley Tucci's Cardinal Bellini, or will a right-wing reactionary like Sergio Castellitto's uncompromising Cardinal Tedesco dial back on recent reforms on hot-ticket issues like birth control? 'This is a conclave, not a war,' cautions Lawrence. 'It is a war,' snaps back Bellini. Fiennes's churchman is soon turning Cardinal Columbo, sniffing out some shenanigans involving John Lithgow's shifty priest and even sneaking into the dead Pope's sealed-off chambers for clues. And where does the mysterious Mexican cardinal of Kabul (played by newcomer Carlos Diehz) fit into it all? Berger and Straughan lean enjoyably into the absurdities of a group of ambitious men coming over like children doing dress-up – and all their attendant pomp and ceremony. Isabella Rossellini's icily courteous Sister Agnes, the cardinal's housekeeper, is the other sane one amid this buzzing hive of conspirers. There's also moments of visual grace – nuns under umbrellas, shards of light beaming down on the conclave – that light up this cloistered world. And hold onto your mitre for a third act packed with twists. But it's the quietly magisterial Fiennes who steals the show. Don't be surprised to see white smoke billowing out of the Academy Awards come March.

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