

# A Review Of The Film *Faithful* (1996)

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## Introduction

Paul Mazursky's *Faithful* (1996) is a dark comedy about marriage, betrayal, and performance. Adapted by Chazz Palminteri from his stage play, the film stars Cher as Margaret, Ryan O'Neal as her husband Jack, and Palminteri as Tony, the hitman Jack hires to kill her. The original review accurately observes that the film depends more on dialogue than suspense and that its theatrical origins remain visible. A fuller evaluation should ask how the restricted setting, shifting power, comic tone, acting, and moral stakes affect the film's treatment of a long marriage. *Faithful* is entertaining when its performers turn an implausible crime into verbal combat, but its emotional insights remain uneven because the characters often function as instruments of a clever premise.

## A Marriage Announced as a Crime

The film's central joke can be summarized brutally: after twenty years of marriage, Jack celebrates his anniversary by giving Margaret jewelry while arranging her murder. This contradiction establishes a world in which conventional signs of devotion conceal hostility and self-interest. The necklace is not proof of intimacy; it is part of Jack's performance as husband. The murder plot literalizes the destructive wish that can hide inside resentment. Rather than pursue divorce, confession, or negotiation, Jack attempts to remove the person who knows his failures most closely. The premise is deliberately exaggerated, but exaggeration allows the film to ask whether long relationships can become arrangements sustained by habit, property, and appearance after trust has been emptied out.

## Theatrical Origins and Cinematic Constraint

Most of the action occurs inside the couple's large home, where Tony ties Margaret to a chair and waits for instructions. Mazursky opens the play through exterior scenes and glimpses of Jack's affair, yet the film repeatedly returns to extended conversation in enclosed rooms. This theatricality is not automatically a weakness. Restriction can intensify performance and make language feel dangerous. The problem is that cinema creates expectations about physical space, suspense, and visual discovery that the adaptation only partly uses. Roger Ebert argued that the dialogue and actors were diverting but that the relationships lacked sufficient depth for cinematic realism. The film's challenge is therefore not that it resembles a play, but that it does not fully transform confinement into visual or psychological pressure.

## Margaret's Apparent Powerlessness

Margaret begins as the target, physically restrained in her own home by a stranger. Yet she quickly uses conversation to disrupt the roles assigned to her. She observes Tony, challenges his competence, discusses love, and refuses to remain a passive victim. Cher's performance combines sarcasm, fatigue, anger, and curiosity, suggesting that Margaret has spent years reading emotional evasions. Her ability to talk does not erase the violence of captivity, but it changes the balance of attention. Tony must respond to her rather than simply execute a plan. The film's strongest passages arise when Margaret recognizes that both men depend on performances of control. She becomes dangerous because she can expose the emptiness beneath those performances.

## Tony as Hitman and Confessor

Tony is introduced as a professional killer, but his conduct is too talkative, uncertain, and theatrical to sustain conventional menace. He becomes a confessor and reluctant counselor, discussing his own failed love while listening to Margaret's marriage. Palminteri's script uses the hitman as an outsider who can ask questions spouses avoid. His criminal occupation gives him literal power over life, yet his emotional history makes him vulnerable to Margaret's judgment. The character is comic because professional violence coexists with sentimental need. This mixture also weakens suspense. Viewers soon suspect that Tony is more interested in conversation and role-playing than murder, reducing the threat that should make every exchange urgent.

## Jack and the Cowardice of Delegated Violence

Jack hires another man to solve the conflict he refuses to confront. His affair and murder plot reveal not only betrayal but avoidance. He wants Margaret gone without taking responsibility for ending the marriage or acknowledging his motives. Delegation allows him to imagine himself separated from the violence. The hitman will perform the act, while Jack remains the respectable husband. This moral distance resembles the way people outsource uncomfortable consequences through institutions or intermediaries. Ryan O'Neal's performance makes Jack weak and self-protective rather than grandly villainous. The film could have developed this cowardice more deeply by showing what Jack believes marriage has taken from him, but it often treats him as a necessary third point in the plot's comic geometry.

## Marriage as Performance

*Faithful* repeatedly contrasts the public institution of marriage with private emotional disorder. The fact that two people "get married in church" does not guarantee loyalty, honesty, or safety. Jack and Margaret possess the house, anniversary ritual, and history associated with a successful couple, yet

these forms have become unstable. The film suggests that marriage requires ongoing interpretation rather than one permanent promise made at the beginning. At the same time, it does not portray ordinary marital conflict realistically. Hiring a hitman converts resentment into absurdity. The value of the exaggeration lies in exposing how symbolic gestures can coexist with contempt. Its limitation is that extreme plotting can replace the difficult middle ground where real relationships deteriorate through repeated smaller choices.

## Dialogue as Action

The original review correctly notices that the film is “about dialogue.” In a talk-driven drama, speech must function as action: each story, joke, accusation, and silence should alter power. Margaret uses wit to delay Tony, Tony uses stories to humanize himself, and Jack uses explanations to avoid moral clarity. The best exchanges reveal that language is both honest and strategic. Characters disclose themselves while trying to control how disclosure will be interpreted. Palminteri’s writing contains sharp reversals and theatrical rhythms, but it can also feel self-conscious, as though characters know they are performing clever dialogue for an audience. When the words become more polished than the emotions supporting them, the film’s darkness loses weight.

## Dark Comedy and Uneasy Tone

The film asks viewers to laugh at a situation involving attempted murder, infidelity, bondage, and emotional cruelty. Dark comedy succeeds when humor exposes the absurd logic of violence without making harm irrelevant. *Faithful* often finds comedy in Tony’s lack of professionalism and the characters’ shifting alliances. The tone becomes uneasy when Margaret’s physical danger appears too remote. If the audience never believes Tony might kill her, the premise becomes an elaborate therapy session rather than a crime. Ebert’s complaint that little is truly at stake identifies this issue. The film wants both menace and conversational lightness, but it repeatedly protects the characters from consequences, reducing the moral pressure that could make the humor sharper.

## Realism and Deliberate Artificiality

Judging *Faithful* solely by realism may miss its deliberate artificiality. The story resembles a chamber play in which three figures embody betrayal, judgment, and survival. The large house becomes less a realistic home than a stage for marital deconstruction. Tony’s implausible behavior and the coincidences of the plot invite audiences to focus on verbal and symbolic meaning. Yet artificiality still requires emotional consistency. Viewers need to understand why Margaret remains engaged, why Tony changes, and what Jack hopes to preserve. The film supplies enough performance energy to carry individual scenes, but the transitions sometimes feel designed by the playwright rather than earned by the characters. Stylization becomes a problem when it prevents consequences from

accumulating.

## Cher's Performance

Cher gives the film its emotional center by refusing to play Margaret as either helpless victim or invulnerable comedian. Her stillness under restraint makes small changes in expression significant, and her delivery turns dialogue into a test of the men around her. She conveys a person who is shocked by immediate danger but not surprised by the deeper fact of marital betrayal. This distinction gives Margaret history beyond what the script explains directly. Cher's star presence also complicates captivity: the camera remains aware of her control even when the character lacks physical freedom. The performance suggests a stronger film centered more fully on Margaret's choices before and after the encounter, rather than on the cleverness of the hitman's interruption.

## Palminteri and O'Neal

Palminteri brings comic timing and bruised sentiment to Tony, making the hitman both ridiculous and potentially volatile. His stage experience with the material helps him navigate long exchanges, although the character's charm can soften the reality that he accepts money to kill a stranger. Ryan O'Neal plays Jack as compromised and evasive, which suits the premise, but the screenplay gives him less emotional complexity. The imbalance matters because a marriage story requires some understanding of both spouses, even when one acts atrociously. Jack's affair and plot establish guilt, but they do not explain the twenty years that preceded them. The film's triangle is therefore dynamically performed but structurally uneven: Margaret and Tony generate interest while Jack triggers action without becoming equally legible.

## Gender and the Captive-Woman Device

The film uses a familiar device in which a woman's emotional life becomes visible because male violence confines her. Margaret gains verbal authority, but the plot still requires her to be tied up so that men and audience will listen. This contradiction deserves attention. The screenplay gives Cher strong dialogue and allows Margaret to expose male weakness, yet her agency is initially created through victimization. A more fully developed feminist reading would ask what options Margaret had before Tony entered and what freedom means after survival. The film criticizes Jack's possessiveness but sometimes treats danger as a convenient route to marital honesty. Emotional revelation should not be confused with compensation for violence, and survival does not automatically repair betrayal.

# What the Film Says about Fidelity

The title refers not only to sexual fidelity but to faithfulness toward promises, identity, and truth. Jack is unfaithful through his affair and murder plan. Tony is unfaithful to the professional role he was hired to perform, which becomes morally positive but narratively unstable. Margaret must decide whether fidelity to a twenty-year marriage requires endurance, forgiveness, departure, or a new definition of self. The film is strongest when it treats faithfulness as an active ethical choice rather than institutional status. It is weaker when the ending implies that one extraordinary night can resolve long-term deception. Trust damaged over years cannot be restored through witty confrontation alone. The film opens that question more successfully than it answers it.

## Overall Evaluation

*Faithful* remains watchable because three experienced performers turn an improbable premise into a contest of voice and presence. Its theatricality gives the dialogue room, and its dark comedy reveals the absurdity of cowardice disguised as marital respectability. The film's limits are equally clear. Suspense weakens once Tony appears unlikely to act, Jack lacks depth, and the marriage is discussed more than fully imagined. The result is a film that produces lively scenes without leaving a proportionate emotional aftermath. It is not "about nothing," but its ideas about marriage, agency, and betrayal remain less developed than its setup promises. The adaptation entertains most when viewed as a chamber performance rather than a realistic crime drama.

## Conclusion

Paul Mazursky's *Faithful* uses attempted murder as darkly comic pressure on a long marriage. Margaret's verbal resistance, Tony's unstable professionalism, and Jack's delegated cowardice create an unusual triangle in which speech matters more than physical action. The film effectively exposes the gap between public marital ritual and private betrayal, and Cher gives Margaret emotional authority beyond the screenplay's construction. Yet the limited danger, thin characterization of Jack, and stage-bound adaptation reduce realism and lasting impact. *Faithful* is ultimately a diverting, actor-driven exploration of trust whose sharp dialogue raises questions that the plot's artificial resolution cannot fully answer with equal dramatic force.

## Works Cited

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