

The very real sham marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Smith

Donald Glover and Francesca Sloane's remake is in some ways the inverse of the 2005 original.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [May 2024](#) issue



Donald Glover and Maya Erskine in *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (Photo: David Lee / Prime Video)

“Marriage is a house you build, and sometimes your tastes change,” a neighbor (Paul Dano) says to John Smith (Donald Glover) near the end of the new series *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (created by Glover and Francesca Sloane; streaming on Amazon Prime). The neighbor is trying to figure out the relationship between John and his wife, Jane (Maya Erskine). He’s been told they are software engineers who recently moved to New York City, but he can sense that something doesn’t add up.

That is because John and Jane are undercover agents for a nebulous agency, playing at being married to keep their cover. The show borrows its basic DNA from the 2005 movie by the same name, but the assumptions about love and work that give the premise its satirical edge have changed in the intervening 20 years.

In the original movie, Mr. and Mrs. Smith (Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie) are rich, bored, and hiding their secret identities even from each other. When they are assigned the job of killing each other by their respective agencies, their pent-up ennui erupts in gunfire and explosions, reigniting their passion with each volley of bullets. The humor works because this vision of the American Dream—beautiful home, financial security, stable marriage—is so taken for granted it starts to feel like a trap that needs to be escaped.

Our new John and Jane are thirty-somethings with no prospects of meaningful work and no clear path to financial stability. They meet for the first time when they move into the gorgeous brownstone the agency has custom renovated for them, slipping on wedding rings almost as soon as they shake hands.

As they gallivant around the world, executing jobs they do not understand and do not question, they move through the stages of courtship and love. They trade quips and get-to-know you anecdotes as they orchestrate their first deadly delivery. They share a first kiss while trying to extract information from a target, confess their love before hand-to-hand combat, and debate whether they want kids while babysitting an asset they kidnapped. These are delightfully hilarious and often poignant bits that work because of the disconnect between the sweet, mundane phases of love and the extreme violence of the spy-assassin context—but also because of the surprising compatibility between the two.

As their relationship hits a rough patch, we watch their worn-out arguments—she is too controlling; he's too childish; she doesn't trust him; he doesn't understand her—play out against the backdrop of sniper fire and rooftop chases. But isn't that how all intimate arguments feel in the moment? Like life and death stakes with no easy escape?

A surprising amount of pop-culture storytelling takes the premise that there are spies and professional assassins hiding in our midst, using the cover of ordinary life to execute violence the rest of us can't imagine. There is a double-edged satire at work in most of these stories. The flat, monotonous drudgery of middle-class life is

brought into relief by the high stakes, adrenaline-fueled life of the assassin. There is a vicarious thrill in imagining the blood-red heart beating behind the staid decorum of PTA meetings and dinner parties with colleagues. But the thrilling escapades of espionage easily turn into drudgery of their own kind, each job just another repeat of the same old grind—a different kind of cog in a different machine, but monotonous and meaningless nonetheless.

If even international spies and assassins find life overdetermined and meaningless, what hope do the rest of us have, trapped as we are in the onslaught of emails and pointless meetings? The protagonists of these spy-related stories usually break free by finding meaning in new work or love. Barry Berkman in the HBO series *Barry* turns to acting as a way out of the emotional dead zone of his assassin gig. Martin Blank in *Grosse Pointe Blank*, an early classic in the genre, gives up his killing lifestyle when he finally gets the girl he left behind in high school.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith hits many of these same beats, but its satire is even darker. John and Jane didn't find their way to this work because they wanted freedom. If anything, the freedom to choose their own path has left them unmoored and flailing. Jane couldn't find other jobs, despite her master's degree. John had just a few hundred dollars in the bank and was trying not to seem desperate. The only path they can see to the upper-middle-class stability to which they aspire—home ownership, steady work, stable marriage—is giving over their agency to a mysterious super-organization.

Like their neighbor who compares marriage to taste in architecture, the Smiths' marriage counselor, not understanding what they are really talking about when they talk about the stresses of working together, suggests that they could leave their jobs. They could even, she reminds them, leave their marriage. If they are still together it is because they are choosing to be. She means this as liberating news, a celebration of the daily act to recommit to a partner. But they have learned the hard way observing what happens to Smiths who try to leave each other or the company. Their marriage might be a fraud, but it comes with an unspoken vow of "until death do us part" that is meant with deadly seriousness.

Instead of railing against these constraints, the show leans into them. John and Jane realize that their only real choice is learning how to live in full knowledge that their choices are illusionary. It is a very old lesson, one Augustine, Calvin, or the Buddha could teach us. It is also an almost direct inverse of the original movie, where a "real marriage" must be salvaged through adventure and choice. This new Mr. and Mrs.

Smith know their marriage is a sham from the moment it begins. But knowing that just might lead to the real thing.