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Movie review: 'The Debt'

An excellent script and cast, plus John Madden's direction, keep this spy thriller taut and riveting.

By Betsy Sharkey, Los Angeles Times Film Critic

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Bristling with dangers both corporeal and cerebral, "The Debt" is a superbly crafted espionage thriller packed with Israeli-Nazi score settling. A steely Helen Mirren and Jessica Chastain stalk its sinister interior, upping the ante and the adrenaline with every twist and turn.

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Mossad secret agent Rachel Singer — her initially defining years played by the white-hot Chastain, the older redefining ones by Oscar winner Mirren — is the key that unlocks the story and its dilemmas. But the film overall is blessed by a crack cast — Marton Csokas, Sam Worthington and Jesper Christensen in particular — who keep your spine tingling and mind spinning as the story moves through a maze of deception.

Presiding over the complexities is British director John Madden, a good match for the material. Over the years he has proved particularly adroit at parsing the fraught — consider the range of shading in just three of his films: "Ethan Frome," "Her Majesty, Mrs. Brown" and "Shakespeare in Love." "The Debt," an adaptation of the well-regarded 2007 Israeli film "Ha-Hov," was a meaty story to start with. It has been neatly expanded to heavy up the past by a rangy group of writers: Matthew Vaughn (a writer-director-producer with an eclectic vitae that includes "X-Men: First Class" and "Kick-Ass"), Jane Goldman (a novelist and Vaughn's "Kick-Ass" co-writer) and Peter Straughan ("The Men Who Stare at Goats," among others).

Madden sets the stage with an evocative scene, beautifully rendered by cinematographer Ben Davis ("Stardust"), that will only gain force as the mystery is revealed. In the belly of a military transport plane, three people are in the shadows. As the back ramp opens, one of them whispers, "Breathe." It turns out to be fitting advice for the characters and not a bad suggestion for those of us watching.

After that tantalizing hint at earlier intrigues, the film shifts to 1997 Tel Aviv. Rachel (Mirren picking up the thread), long retired and resigned to a more settled life, finds herself uncomfortably

in the spotlight again. The occasion is her daughter's new book on the daring capture of the surgeon of Birkenau — an operation Rachel was instrumental in 30 years earlier. It becomes a handy, though at times a bit too forced, way to fill in some of the back story we'll need to understand what exactly is at stake and to transport us back in time.

At a book launch party, as Rachel reads aloud a short excerpt about the seminal event that provides the spine of the film, East Berlin, circa 1965 comes into view. It is a cold, dreary city, a stark contrast from the polished, sparking Tel Aviv we've just left. A trio of young Mossad agents — Chastain stepping back in as the younger Rachel, Stephan (Csokas) and David (Worthington) — have been brought together to pull off a critical mission in Israel's effort to bring Nazi war criminals to justice.

Their target is the monstrous Doktor Bernhardt (Christensen), notorious for the surgical maiming he did in the concentration camps. He has eluded capture, slipping into a role as an OB-GYN, a fertility specialist, hiding behind a new identity and a new name, Vogel.

Chastain turns in a searing performance as young Rachel, infusing her with aching vulnerability. Csokas brings a visceral life to Stephan's burning ambition, while Worthington embodies the tightly wound repression, righteousness and regret that will drive David. The two men make an excellent pair, tugging at Rachel's loyalties, as well as her heart.

Much of the drama is handled like a stage play in the claustrophobic confines of an East German apartment, where the young agents wrestle with the issue of humanity itself — and how much of it should be accorded to a monster like Vogel. As brutal dictatorships are being brutally crushed in the real world now on almost a daily basis, it's a particularly relevant question to consider.

For all the careful plotting and planning — a trap set, the quarry caught — there is a mistake. It marks Rachel in a way that shapes and scars her literally and psychologically for life, and sets in motion a series of choices that will haunt the others equally.

Those choices come to a head in Tel Aviv, where Tom Wilkinson comes in as the older version of Stephan, now wheelchair-bound, yet powerful still in the Israeli special forces. Ciarán Hinds turns up as the aged David, still troubled by what happened 30 years ago. There is a wrong to be righted, set up at the beginning by an extraordinarily chilling scene that is replayed in Rashomon-like ways throughout the film but that never loses its withering power over Rachel, Stephan, David or, as importantly, us.

Madden keeps the action of past and present moving along like freight trains, with a collision inevitable. A final chapter, written in blood by Mirren, shifts the balance of power of the film briefly in favor of the present, though ultimately the past wins the day.

The bridge between the two is an absolutely riveting and chilling performance by Christensen, who's gone up against James Bond a couple of times in the past. It would have been easy to play the Nazi surgeon as a black, soulless creature. What makes him so fearsome is the way he tries to seduce the young Mossad agents — not looking for love, but for them to recognize him as being as much a human as they are, to see the very flaws they despise in him reflected in themselves — and in this Christensen's nuance is lethal.

Lest you worry that this is a morality play masquerading in secret-agent clothing, have no fear.

Madden has woven in a series of tightly coiled and excellently choreographed action sequences that are "Bourne Identity" quality, making "The Debt" as bloody as it is brainy. Breathe.

betsy.sharkey@latimes.com

'The Debt'

MPAA rating: R for some violence and language

Running time: 1 hour, 53 minutes

Playing: In general release

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