

The Debt

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Critic Rating:

'The Debt' pays off in thrills, moral conflicts

By John DeFore

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A buried-secrets drama interwoven with Nazi-hunting intrigue, "The Debt" roots itself in reality more plausibly than most contemporary spy films without sacrificing the genre's tense thrills. Splitting its story between two years, 1966 and 1997, it follows three Mossad agents forced to ask themselves what constitutes justice after the Holocaust's unthinkable crimes.

Though Helen Mirren features most prominently in advertising materials, the film's heart beats with the younger version of her character, played by this year's breakthrough actress Jessica Chastain ("The Tree of Life," "The Help"). It is Chastain who survives the film's most chilling encounters: As Rachel Singer, an agent pursuing "Surgeon of Birkenau" Dieter Vogel (perpetrator of Josef Mengele-type concentration-camp medical experiments), she poses as an East German fertility patient and must allow the man she's hunting to give her multiple medical examinations.

We know from the film's first scenes (set in 1997) that Singer's team will capture the doctor, who will later be killed trying to escape, and that the three will be hailed as Israeli heroes. It's also clear they share secrets dating back to this period: Just as a book celebrating their decades-old mission is published, Singer's old partner David (Ciarán Hinds, who also starred in the Israeli-espionage thriller "Munich") kills himself.

But how they caught Vogel, and their attempts to bring him back alive, are the meat of the story, and director John Madden proves better at sustaining the suspense of near-misses and dramatic escapes than might be expected from the director of the fluffy "Shakespeare in Love."

At the same time, Chastain and co-stars Marton Csokas and Sam Worthington enact a tight-quarters love triangle in which sexual tension is shadowed by losses each character suffered in the war. The three actors share a chemistry only heightened by their East Berlin hideout - a dump with a leaking roof, decaying plumbing and, eventually, a bound-and-gagged war criminal on the living room floor.

Their hostage becomes an increasing psychological burden as the team waits to smuggle him out of the city. Jesper Christensen, as Vogel, speaks dispassionately in his attempts to get inside his captors' heads, but never turns hammy, Hannibal Lecter-ishly menacing. The matter-of-factness of his contempt for Jews (offset by occasional, baffling expressions of empathy) is unsettling enough.

Structurally, the film bounces back and forth a little, but it essentially lets the 1967 story play out before moving to the action 30 years later. That's the simple route, since it keeps the trio's secrets under wraps until the last minute, but it risks leaving the audience spent just as Mirren's yarn begins.

A more daring script (this one is adapted from the Israeli film "Ha-Hov") might have found ways to tell the stories in parallel, doling out just enough information to keep viewers involved.

But, as it is, "The Debt" grasps the viewer pretty firmly, delivering thrills without trivializing the moral quandaries that set it in motion.

Contains violence and some foul language.

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