

DVD Select: 'Eastern Promises' a gripping mob thriller

by Robert_J_Hawkins

From the moment he stepped on screen in "Eastern Promises" (Universal, 4 stars) I was prepared to despise the Russian hood Nikolai (Viggo Mortensen). His predatory look, his sneer, his cold personality, his Russianness - they should have been painfully out of place on a London street and yet, Nikolai swaggers like he owns the block.

'EASTERN PROMISES' - Naomi Watts and Viggo Mortensen star in the gripping mob thriller 'Eastern Promises.' CNS Photo courtesy of Peter Mountain. DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin He doesn't, though.

It is the cheerful, sophisticated, humble, grandfatherly restaurateur Semyon (Armin Mueller-Stahl) who is in charge. And his alcoholic, psychotic, needy son Kirill (Vincent Cassel) who executes the dirty work.

So who is Nikolai?

That is what hospital midwife Anna (Naomi Watts) wonders, too, after she inherits the diary of a young teenage Russian prostitute who dies during a miscarriage in which the baby survives. Anna's first impressions of Nikolai, and not without reason, are dismal. His first attempt at smoothness and flirtation comes off smarmy and clumsy, a parochial characterization.

The diary, it turns out, is a ticking bomb (and a clue to the movie's title) as is the baby.

But then, so is Nikolai a ticking bomb.

Mortensen's character does the skillful cinematic equivalent of an intellectual striptease during the course of this story. Slowly, ever so slowly, bits of my first impression are stripped away, destroyed. In the end, Nikolai is nothing at all like I first imagined, and yet he is all that I imagined.

He is indeed a hardened criminal, a tattooed graduate of the Russian prison system, a stone-cold killer. The movie's most-heralded scene - the fight for his life in a steam room shows that Nikolai knows how to kill. And yet he can exhibit the most unexpected and inexplicable acts of compassion, a betrayal of the dossier moviegoers are quietly assembling on Nikolai.

There are reasons, which shall not be betrayed here.

In the end, Nikolai sits in the same booth from which Semyon held forth over his domain of drugs, prostitutes, weapons and shakedowns and thoughtfully flips back and forth in his hand a wristwatch. His suit has been upgraded a few notches and he looks smoother than the character we first met.

The movie ends, and I am left wondering just what it is that Nikolai is really up to. (OK, so maybe I still don't trust him.)

In a recent phone conversation, Mortensen said that maybe that ambiguity isn't so bad.

"Well, that's one sign that it was a good story, well-told," he said, "the fact that you even have the questions. ... With 'Eastern Promises,' I think each time you see it you see more and you have more questions."

And with exquisite timing, Mortensen pauses then adds, "And I'm not going to tell you what he was thinking."

"I know what he was thinking, obviously, but it's good that you wonder, you know?"

It is good and you better get used to the moral ambiguity because David Cronenberg, who directed this story (and directed Mortensen in "A History of Violence") is all about moral ambiguity. There is good and evil, but they can, and do overlap - just like in real life.

"Intentionally, David put me in the same booth where Armin was sitting before - sort of in the same position, also with a newspaper, also with a bottle of vodka and with a suit, and with a particular color of tie to symbolize his ascension, I guess.

"In a way, I think one feeling you get from it - I did - is beware of what you wish for, you know, because I

mean, now what? And what's good about this movie - in the same sense as 'History of Violence' was good and satisfying - on an artistic level is that at the end of the story you feel that it will continue."

OK, don't start squealing "Sequel!" All Mortensen is saying is that "the movie asks a lot of questions. It doesn't give you answers. You have to think for yourself and I think that's the highest form of respect you can pay an audience member."

The questions tumble from the mind of viewers. Will Nikolai be content to continue the deadly charade that has brought him to this point of power? Will Nikolai distance himself from the life that took him into Russian prisons and out again? Does power corrupt? Is Nikolai a man of integrity or a man of opportunity?

Will Mortensen revisit the character Nikolai in a sequel some day?

"It's funny because there are several people that have asked that and I think they've asked David. And he's even sort of jokingly asked me, and maybe he's even thinking about it.

"You could easily carry on. I mean, just as you could with 'History of Violence,' but especially with this, you know? On some level like, is it 'Bourne Ultimatum'? What's going to happen next?"

I know so many people who left the theater asking that very same question - what happens next? And it's clear Mortensen has been putting a lot of thought into the matter. The possible extensions of the story come tumbling out with little provocation:

"You could - I don't know, Nikolai could go to Russia to hide out or he could - who knows what? Or Armin gets out of jail, what's he going to do? Or even from jail, who is he going to direct to try to regain what was

his, or to exact revenge?

"How safe is the uncle? How safe is Anna? What is Kirill - Vincent's character - what's he going to think? How long is it going to take him to realize that in some sense he's been betrayed? Or used. I mean, all of those things. I mean, it's true. There are a lot of possibilities. You could tell any number of stories about it."

And Mortensen isn't coy about a sequel.

"If he (Cronenberg) came up with a really good story idea, why the hell not?," he says with a little laugh. "It might be interesting."

Interesting? Without a doubt.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"The Kingdom" (Universal, 2 stars) A special FBI team drops into Saudi Arabia to investigate the terrorist assault on a Western housing compound. If you are into symbolism, you'll note that the terrorists attack a bunch of people playing baseball. They have five days to solve this horrific crime. Not much time, and the fact that Saudi officials feel that they are encroaching on a local matter doesn't help. Being sons of the Bush Cowboy era, Ronald Fleury (Jamie Foxx) and his crew (including Jennifer Garner, Chris Cooper and Jason Bateman) must cut through the protocols and Get The Job Done. They find an ally in Col. Faris Al Ghazi (Ashraf Barhom). Anyone who seriously wonders why we're in the mess we're in today in the Middle East will find a lot to be uncomfortable about with this film. For action movie junkies, it is another run-chase-explode orgasm from the big screen.

"The Brothers Solomon" (Sony, 1 star) and "American Pie Presents Beta House" (Universal, 1 star) When did Christmas week become the dumping ground for the dregs of Hollywood? The first is the woeful spawn of "Dumb and Dumber" (but not the most woeful of its spawn). Will Arnett and Will Forte are brothers. They are as socially adept as an Eskimo in Manhattan. Come to think of it they were raised in the arctic and home-schooled. Which becomes the problem (and running joke) as they set out to fulfill the wish of their dying father (Lee Majors) for a grandchild.

The second film is easily summed up in the shorthand of its presenting title: the overly inbred spawn of "American Pie," a funny movie that long ago exhausted its half-life comedy cycle. Both films are a good argument for prolonging the Hollywood writers' strike. Perhaps the writers who suck their creativity off the cavity of long dead comedies will move on to another field, like real estate investment.

And the rest:

- "Shattered" (Lionsgate) Pierce Brosnan kidnaps the daughter of Gerard Butler and Maria Bello and forces them to carry out certain tasks to ensure her return.

- "Jackass 2.5" (Paramount) Johnny Knoxville and Bam Margera lead their band of brain-deads through more stupid stuff than you could possibly imagine - and take that as a compliment.

- "The Hearbreak Kid" (Paramount) Directors Peter and Bobby Farrelly put Ben Stiller through the remake grinder - from a 1972 comedy in which Charles Grodin meets the woman of his dreams, while on his honeymoon with his newlywed nightmare.

- "Robin-B-Hood" (Genius Productions) Jackie Chan is a gambler turned robber who ends up with a kidnapped baby on his hands. He's met his match.

- "Rush Hour 3" (New Line) Jackie Chan (who must make two movies a week) pairs up again with Chris Tucker for another action-packed East-meets-West sequel as they pursue the mysterious Triad crime syndicate through Paris.

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