

Movie Review: 'Rendition'

by *David_Elliott*

There's a curious line in the dialogue of "Rendition": "The CIA calls it 'extraordinary rendition.' It started under Clinton."

Which will probably go down like pudding for viewers who figure such "balancing" gives the film credibility, deflecting some blame for a brazen policy away from the current administration. And, hey, this is a Hollywood movie with hopes.

'RENDITION' - Meryl Streep and Alan Arkin star in the political drama 'Rendition.' CNS Photo courtesy of Sam Emerson. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.)

Gavin Hood's film, written by Kelley Sane, is also fairly bright and humane. Sane seems a quirky choice to write this "fresh from the headlines" thriller, having made only an obscure, gay-themed comedy. But she

delivers for Hood, who did the heartfelt South African drama "Tsotsi."

A big, busy cast moves in intriguing locations in an unnamed North African country, maybe Morocco. At the center is CIA analyst Doug Freeman (Jake Gyllenhaal), new to the job and relaxed about it - until the CIA toughie on duty is killed right next to him by a terror blast. The real target is hefty prison chief and CIA go-along Abasi (Igal Naor, a virtual replica of Telly Savalas, yet less amusing).

So vivid is Naor that we even come to feel for his character, a virtuoso of basement torture. Freeman is the CIA witness of this, because the new, screaming object of electric and water torment is an Egyptian-born, American engineer, Anwar (Omar Metwally, fine in a very stressed role).

We meet Freeman's local girlfriend, and Abasi's family, and, especially, Anwar's pregnant wife back in Chicago, Isabella (Reese Witherspoon). The movie is a lacing of personal lives, not only plot strings. Agonized Isabella, called Izzy, goes to D.C. to find out what happened to her husband.

Instead, Peter Sarsgaard is excellent as her old friend (lover?) Alan, top aide of a tough senator (Alan Arkin). The wall of official secrecy deflects even him, once the CIA's steel gatekeeper with a country club smile goes to work. That would be Meryl Streep, and nobody castrates male egos quite like Streep.

A movie that has only two major scenes for Streep and one for Arkin has talent to spare. "Rendition" is spongy in some sidelines, notably the stuff about a cute calligraphic artist (Moa Khouas) attracted to a terror sect, and his furtive affair with enforcer Abasi's naive daughter (Zineb Okhach).

The time-twist finish is either cinematically clever or a touch silly in this headlong narrative. That includes an illicit affair, Central Casting fanatics, a pregnant wife, a weepy grandmother, Casbah-mode intrigue, even a getaway by boat that could fit into "To Have and Have Not."

And yet the basic substance is piercing. The extraordinary, law-subverting nature of "rendition" is rendered viably enough that American citizens should watch and then talk, and not about melodrama.

A New Line Cinema release. Director: Gavin Hood. Writer: Kelley Sane. Cast: Jake Gyllenhaal, Reese Witherspoon, Meryl Streep, Peter Sarsgaard, Omar Metwally, Alan Arkin, Igal Naor. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes. Rated R. 3 stars.

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