

You Say You Want a Retribution: “The Debt,” “Apollo 18,” and “Shark Night 3D”

Written by Mike Schulz

Sunday, 04 September 2011 08:51

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THE DEBT

After her moving, memorable performances in *The Tree of Life*, *The Help*, and the current John Madden thriller *The*

Debt

I'm beginning to think that Jessica Chastain can do almost anything. As evidenced by the actress' latest (though not last) 2011 release, however, one thing she cannot do is pass for a younger version of Helen Mirren, or at least Mirren as she appears here; beyond their ill-matching features, Chastain's empathetic soulfulness and emotional accessibility bear little relation to the detached calm and haunted inscrutability of her more seasoned counterpart.

Having said that, if one of your few complaints about a movie lies in the casting of Jessica Chastain and/or Helen Mirren, obviously you have very little to bitch about.

A tale of espionage and vengeance that toggles between 1966 Berlin and 1997 Tel Aviv, *The Debt*

is the rare international spy thriller that's less about mechanics than character, though its expertly crafted mechanics are nothing to sniff at. In the Berlin passages, Chastain, Sam Worthington, and Marton Csokas play secret agents for the Mossad, sent to kidnap a former Nazi – nicknamed “The Surgeon of Birkenau” (Jesper Christensen) – and bring him to Israel to

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stand trial for war atrocities. The Tel Aviv scenes find Mirren, Ciarán Hinds, and Tom Wilkinson portraying these operatives in late middle age, just after their mission has been celebrated in a newly published book. Yet while the results of that mission are shown in the movie’s opening minutes, we gradually come to realize the truth behind what actually occurred between the Nazi and his captors, a truth that if revealed, even 30 years later, could lead to dire consequences for the Mossad agents.

Ordinarily, that’s the sort of synopsis that would cause my eyes to immediately glaze over, as I have a lower tolerance than most for Europe-trotting suspense yarns. (Wanna see narcolepsy in action? Toss me a John le Carré of your choosing.) I’m guessing, though, that if you’re a fan of the genre, you could very easily love *The Debt*, because even I had a blast at this thing; with its script by Matthew Vaughn, Jane Goldman, and Peter Straughan, the film is wholly intriguing, surprisingly thoughtful, and fantastically exciting. As his most noteworthy cinematic works have been *Shakespeare in Love* and *Proof*, I hardly expected Madden to display gifts for escalating anxiety and exquisitely sustained tension, yet his new outing boasts an excess of both. While the movie is superbly paced throughout, there are individual scenes in which Madden’s control of tempo and tone are absolutely masterful – particularly in the one that finds the operatives attempting to sneak their captive through a heavily guarded train depot – and his

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s between Chastain and Christensen, especially, are harrowing but not unbearable. (Without ever resorting to caricature, the smoothly insinuating Christensen creates one of the most loathsome Nazis in recent movies.)

Yet while the majority of the film’s thriller elements are superb – despite a finale that’s too implausibly convenient – *The Debt* is most impressive for its trenchant, probing explorations of responsibility and guilt; the movie is more playful and less serious-minded than Steven Spielberg’s similarly themed *Munich*, but thanks to its cast, Madden’s entertainment packs much of the same emotional punch. Though it felt, somewhat distractingly, as through Worthington and Csokas should’ve swapped roles – the latter’s face suggests Hinds’ to an eerie degree – both actors are in topnotch form, suggesting their characters’ patriotic fervor, and burning desires to avenge their families, with marvelous subtlety. (The generally uninteresting Worthington is damned near revelatory here.) With his beautifully doleful poignancy, Hinds invests his few scenes with startling emotional directness, and Mirren and Wilkinson, as usual, exude hard-won authority and brisk intelligence.

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Chastain, meanwhile, is utterly wondrous. With her Argentinian agent delicately touching one moment, unexpectedly forceful the next, and the possessor a spectacularly effervescent grin that (in the infrequent moments we see it) immediately knocks every gloomy thought out of your head, the actress is perhaps even more captivating here than she was playing Terrence Malick’s beatific Texas mom or Tate Taylor’s damaged Southern belle, which is saying an *awful* lot.

The Debt

is mostly marvelous, and never more so than when focusing on the radiantly talented, hypnotically watchable female star at its center. With high-profile roles in

Coriolanus

and

Take Shelter

still to come, it may seem, by the end of 2011, that Jessica Chastain has been in every other movie released this year. If only that were true.



APOLLO 18

Apollo 18 features a somewhat fun premise – that an unannounced, 1974 mission to the moon was hidden from the public after its trio of astronauts died under mysterious circumstances – and a potentially fun presentational style, with director Gonzalo López-Gallego’s work composed solely of recently leaked “found footage” from NASA. But there endeth the fun. Aside from a few hilariously solemn line readings (“What are we doing here? What are we ...
really

...

doing

?!”), little about this faux-doc thriller is laughably bad; there are a few effective jolts, and López-Gallego’s attempts at verité are rather accomplished. The film’s director, though, proves almost

too

good at the mock-footage thing, because between the shaky, grainy images and the frequently indecipherable dialogue, I spent half the movie just wondering what the hell was going on. (Is there a threat from aliens? From living rocks? From aliens disguised as living rocks?) On the rare occasions when you jump, it’s more from the pummeling booms and bangs on the

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soundtrack than because anything creepy or evocative is going on, and the integrity of the film’s “realism” is badly compromised by whiplash editing that looks to be straight out of the Tony Scott School of Meaningless Hyperactivity. While

Apollo 18

isn’t a total botch, I found my mind wandering with depressing regularity; I was hoping the movie would be

The Blair Witch Project

in a space capsule, but it’s really just torpor in a cineplex.



SHARK NIGHT 3D

Speaking of *The Blair Witch Project*, that film’s Joshua Leonard portrays a leering, snaggle-toothed redneck in David R. Ellis’ *Shark Night 3D*.

And while I typically admire the actor – if you haven’t, definitely catch him in the 2009 indie *Humpday* –

I was more than eager to see him thrown to the sharks here ... a distinction Leonard shares with his fellow castmates, his director,

Shark Night

’s screenwriters, and its effects team. Even if you enter expecting nothing more than cheesy exploitation dreck – and could anyone enter expecting anything

else

? – you’re liable to be amazed at how appallingly inept this sub-B-movie actually is, with its gaggle of hot-young-thang stereotypes, its shoddy visuals, and its pedestrian attempts at tension and scares. (The film’s one legitimately shocking moment? When an adorable golden retriever is thrown into a shark-infested lake. The film’s most hatefully predictable moment?

When the carefree pooch, a few scenes later, is revealed to be unharmed.) It’s also one of the most insistently, unpleasantly misogynistic PG-13 releases I’ve ever seen. One woman (

American Idol

’s Katharine McPhee, no less!) is forced to strip at gunpoint, and in an early sequence, the camera follows slavishly close to a co-ed’s rear end before abandoning the pursuit and tailing one of our (male) leads; Ellis ogles his faceless female extra just because he

can

. Yet from the hysterically convoluted plot to the unbridled hamminess of the usually unimpeachable Donal Logue, little about this grab-the-opening-weekend-money-and-run

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cheapo isn't mind-numbingly stupid. After losing a limb to a big fish, one of the film's pinhead college kids tells the bite victim that doctors are on the way, “and they're gonna Humpty Dumpty your ass back together.” Was there not one person among

Shark Night 3D

's team aware that, even with all the king's horses and all the king's men, Humpty Dumpty *couldn't*

be put together again?

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